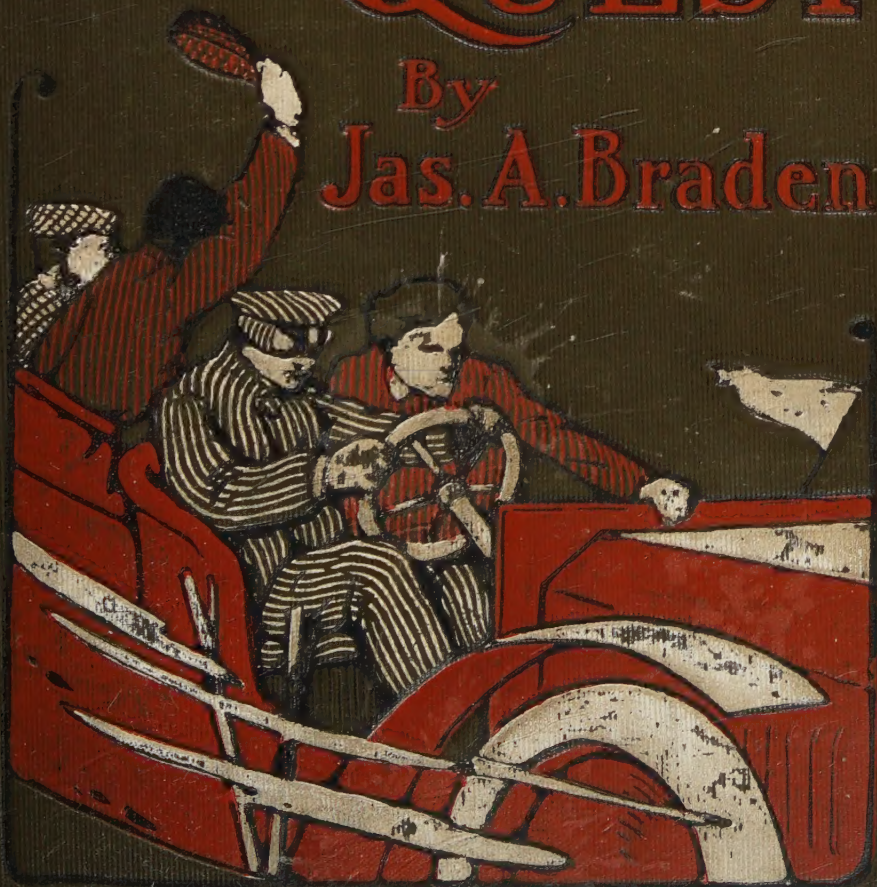


The AUTO BOYS' QUEST

By
Jas. A. Braden



PAUL S. LATIMER

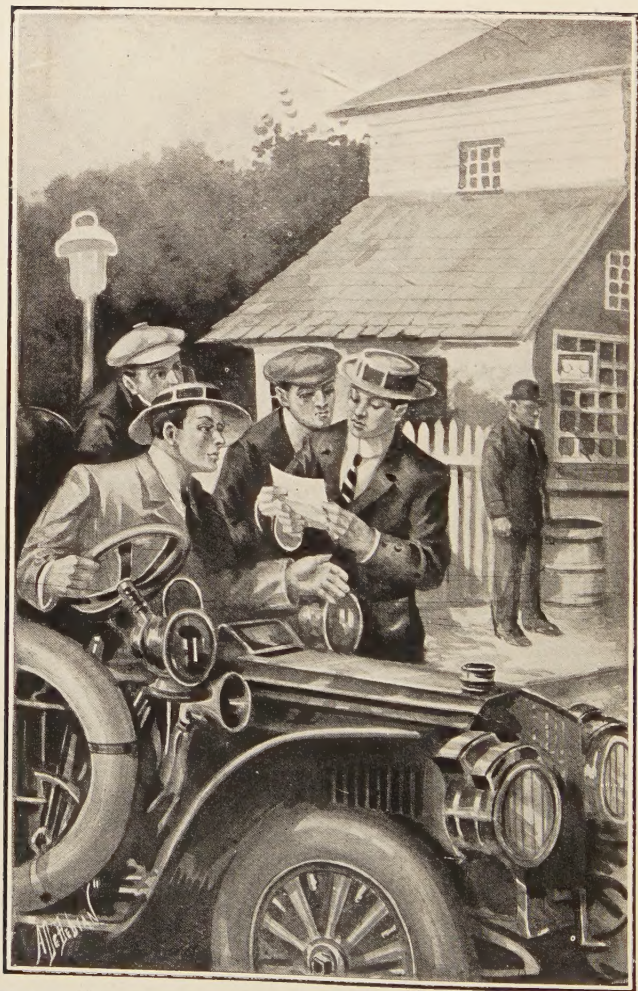
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Phil held up a yellow envelope, then read: "Know you have gone. Don't know where. Rushing around crazy."

(Page 72)

THE AUTO BOYS' QUEST

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"THE AUTO BOYS," "THE AUTO BOYS' OUTING," "FAR PAST
THE FRONTIER," "CAPTIVES THREE," "CONNECTICUT
BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR DeBEBIAN



1911

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY
CHICAGO AKRON, OHIO NEW YORK

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THE AUTO BOYS' QUEST

CHAPTER I

A PLAN AND A SCHEME

“And they piled three stones one on top of another to mark the place. The first was just a big field stone, the second was rough and flat and the third, which was at the top, was the kind called conglomerate. You know—all full of pebbles, like coarse gravel pressed into a mass. Or—or like a fruit cake.”

There was a note of earnestness in Billy Worth's voice, as if he felt his words to be of great importance and desired that his hearers be impressed accordingly. That his communication did have reference to an important matter was made most apparent, perhaps, by the response it elicited, also earnestly spoken:

“And if no one has disturbed them, the chances are the rocks are there yet,” said Phil Way. “I mean that, although the heaving of the ground, as it froze and thawed winter after winter, would probably throw the pile down, the three different stones would still be close together for years upon years.”

“And I’ll be standing here for years upon years without starting this engine if you don’t give me a spark! Almost breaking myself in two, and you sit there threshing over that old stone pile again! Did you think I was working this crank handle just for exercise?” These remarks, both earnest and emphatic, came from a young gentleman who stood at the front of a large touring car, the forward seats of which vehicle were occupied by the two whose words have been earlier noted. “Or did you think I was trying an experiment in perpetual motion?” he added, with equal sarcasm.

Mr. Billy Worth, at the steering wheel, laughed good-naturedly. “I solemnly beg your pardon, Mac,” he said. “I was thinking of

those three stones. Now you're all right!" So saying, he moved the quadrant to the point at which there was a spark advanced to set the automobile's engine chugging when his friend with the crank handle had again given it an initial motion.

"Was pretty sure Dave would make a discovery if he worked hard enough," piped a shrill voice tantalizingly. "I noticed that the spark wasn't on. Meant to mention it after while, but really didn't like to interrupt the conversation!"

These remarks, accompanied by a very self-complacent grin, proceeded from a young gentleman whose half-recumbent position in the tonneau was possibly more comfortable than dignified. Indeed, comfort rather than dignity was plainly his preference as no doubt it often is with persons somewhat less than fifteen years of age.

"Meant to mention it, did you?" came with marked emphasis from the one addressed as Dave, slamming the tonneau door behind him,

as the machine moved out of its quarters—a tidy green and yellow building nestling beneath some old elms. “Meant to mention it, eh?” and putting hands suddenly upon the youthful humorist’s shoulders, he shook him pretty vigorously.

The latter took his punishment with utmost good nature, saying only, “No fault of mine! If you fellows don’t know how to start the car, let me know and I’ll teach you. Gee whiz!”

With all its irony, this speech was allowed to pass unnoticed for now the automobile glided with a gentle bounce over the sidewalk and out of the cinder drive of Dr. Way’s residence into the street. All four passengers settled themselves in their seats as if for a rapid ride. Their car ran beautifully and in scarcely more time than is required to state the fact its glistening wheels and body, its shining wind shield, lamps and horn had disappeared at the park gate far down the avenue.

Had you happened to be in that well-known city of the Middle West, Lannington, on this

early day of June in the year 190—, and had you noticed this particular automobile as, guided by well-trained hands, it swept with a flourish around the curve and in through the park entrance, quite possibly you would have wished to make inquiry concerning the car and its occupants. There was something of quiet distinction about the latter and about the machine and the way it was handled.

Inquiry from any person interested in boys or motoring or both—and who is not?—would have been, indeed, entirely natural. Nor would the veriest stranger have experienced difficulty in obtaining information. While in no sense were they especially prominent because of wealth, exalted social position or otherwise, the Auto Boys, as the four were called, were at least well known.

Introduced briefly and individually they are Phil Way, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones. Just what sort of lads they are will become apparent as the acquaintanceship progresses. At the present moment attention

must be returned to the spot they have so recently quitted—the little green and yellow building beneath the elms.

A very tidy structure is the small garage the four friends call their own. It stands at the end of the drive leading out past the blooming syringas and a great bed of vari-colored peonies to the street. Approach and entrance from that direction are very convenient. Or entrance by way of the alley, in the rear, may be accomplished quite as easily. Its doors, both front and back, are the largest things about the building. With both opened wide the automobile can be driven directly through. To back the car out is unnecessary at any time. Driving in from the rear means simply driving out through the front doors, or vice versa.

The custom of the young proprietors of this model establishment of its kind with reference to coming and going with the car was well known among their acquaintances. It was well known, too, that at most times the alley doors of the garage were kept closed and

locked. Just why any of their friends should remain waiting at that side of the building, therefore, with them inside and the machine headed toward the street, as a glance in at the back window would easily show, might well be considered a trifle mysterious.

Also, just why any friend should apply an ear to the small crack between the door and the wall of the building proper—stooping down in an attitude of thoughtful attention upon all that was taking place inside—might well be made a subject of inquiry.

Nevertheless precisely such a situation had existed to-day. A sharp-eyed young fellow, not much less than sixteen years of age, had stood for all of ten minutes in practically the position indicated. Not until the automobile and its owners had departed did he also leave, walking hastily down the alley and keeping much closer under the cover of the high, tight-board fence than would seem entirely necessary.

The young man was too respectable in his general appearance to be mistaken for a tramp

or other type of vagabond loitering about for no good purpose. Nor had he any of the usual sneak-thief characteristics, suspicious as his actions were. Only a half-surly, half-defiant expression about his hawk-like eyes and a scowl above his heavy brows gave a clue to his thoughts and purposes. It was easy to guess that in some way he had suffered a disappointment.

At the corner of a residence street upon which the lad presently emerged, his face lighted up. Smiling, as if he had concluded to think better of the matter whatever it may have been, he spoke quite aloud, yet in a low tone: " 'And they piled three stones on top of one another to mark the place. One was a big field stone, another a flat stone and the third, which was at the top, was conglomerate.' " And then a moment later, " 'Conglomerate! All full of pebbles like coarse gravel!' As if any man didn't know 'conglomerate'!"

There was something coarse and rasping in the way the boy repeated the latter phrase of

the words he had overheard at the green and yellow shed. It suggested both maliciousness and mischief. His further language as he spoke in undertones to no ears but his own was confirmation of such an opinion. "Plenty of time yet. Guess wherever any old thirty horse-power motor can go, a forty-five can follow! Confound those little beasts! I don't see where they can be!"

That the young man's latter remark, even less amiable than it was complimentary, had reference to someone whom he expected to see, was made apparent a few minutes later when a heavy car of the roadster type, too lumbering to be of the best, came suddenly around the corner and stopped at the curb near him. The machine carried two young fellows of about his own age.

"Been looking for you everywhere, Pick," said one of the two—he at the wheel—"You said you'd go out Chestnut. What you doing way down here on the avenue?"

"Said nothin' of the kind," growled the

sharp-eyed one. "I said I'd meet you right here on Green Avenue. Been looking for you till—"

"You did *not*!" spoke the other of the two in the car. "I know what you said!"

But by that time the lad called "Pick" had seated himself in the double rumble, and as the automobile moved forward—"Oh shut up!" he answered moodily. "I'm sore! Still nothing to it but talk of the three stones. Anyhow, though, I've got the exact words about them," and with this he repeated the description of three stones, piled one on top of another, substantially as he had overheard the same.

"Well, they're going somewhere and they're going to start soon. I've found out that much, for sure," spoke the chap who drove. He was a really likable looking fellow, named Perth—Fred, or more often Freddy, when addressed by his first name.

The lad beside him was "Soapy"—otherwise Harry—Gaines, the somewhat spoiled son of one of the very few rich men in Lannington.

He was of such uncertain temper, slipping so far beyond the reach of ordinary mortals and putting on ever and again so vast an air of superiority, possibly because of the paternal wealth, but with or without cause or reason, that his nickname seemed well applied. He it was who claimed ownership of the Roadster.

“Course they’re going somewhere! Haven’t we known it all along? Didn’t they say themselves they were going, and just as good as tell us we wasn’t wanted, when we told ’em we’d go with ’em? Humph! They’ve had a plan rigged up this long while and making such a mystery of it that half the town wonders what they’re up to.”

He of the hawk eyes—otherwise “Pick,” otherwise Tom Pickton—was the speaker. The coarse, rasping quality of his voice was the more pronounced as he put more contempt in it. “Just the same, I’m thinking they can’t go where we can’t follow—if we like; eh, Gaines?” It was in quite a different key, though the voice was still harsh as a file, that

Pickton addressed the owner of the machine.

The latter young gentleman said that with his car he could run circles around the persons to whom the other made reference. He was of the opinion that nothing more interesting could be desired, however, than merely to trail along behind the Auto Boys, (for it was to them that the conversation referred) and by thus being constantly present, annoy and harass them in a way that would be a "deuced lot o' fun."

Then, too, if the four chums who had declined the self-extended invitation that Soapy and his friends accompany them, had in mind the secret exploring of a mystery, a search for a robbers' cave or some such thing, which was considered to be their real purpose, they would be enabled to carry out their plan, at last, only by making terms with the Chosen Trio.

The Chosen Trio, it will be understood, was the name by which Messrs. Pickton, Gaines and Perth had elected to style themselves. "Chosen to be hanged, if anything!" Paul Jones had ungraciously said; but that is neither

here nor there. The three were in no immediate danger of meeting such a fate, and they *were* capable of making themselves most extremely disagreeable, without appearing to trespass beyond their lawful rights. Where one automobile was allowed, for instance, another might follow; and the public roads everywhere were built no more for one individual than for another.

“Well, I was only going to say, if you’ll give me the chance, that I know the four of ’em are going on a trip and what’s more I know just about where,” put in Fred Perth, as Soapy concluded. “They’ve hired Jim Underhill to attend to a lot of the work they had engaged to do and they told him he’d have to begin next week sometime. They wouldn’t tell Jim where they were going. Just said, ‘Ask me no questions an’ I’ll tell you no lies,’ when he put it straight at ’em to know what for a trip was scheduled.”

“Next week, eh?” Pickton ejaculated. “*We’re ready now.* All we’ve got to do is

watch their old boat and when they begin to pack up it will be ditto here. Nothing much to that, eh?"

"Everything's fixed for me to leave any time," said Perth, thinking with satisfaction how, after much difficulty, he had obtained permission to accompany Gaines and Pickton on a proposed motoring expedition.

"Huh! I'll just *go*," spoke Soapy in that braggadocio way so common to his kind.

"Ought to get some new stuff in the touring outfit, I suppose," put in Pick, as if to himself, but really fearful that at the last moment, due to Gaines' well-known careless ways, the car would be found without one item of spare equipment.

"By George! That's right! Run down to the Park Garage, Freddy. We'll load up some stuff and I'll have 'em put it in dad's next month's bill. We'll be away by that time."

These instructions from Soapy, always willing to make purchases if they were to be charged, and the more so if he saw at hand a

way to defer for a time an interview with his father in regard to them, changed the course of the Roadster away from the residence district of the city to the business center.

As the car passed the down-town entrance to the park, the machine of the Auto Boys came up behind and, gliding past, halted before the door of the automobile establishment toward which the Chosen Trio had journeyed. The Roadster drew up beside the Thirty.

"So you fellows are going to let daylight into some more mysteries, eh?" said Pick, in a tone of banter to the occupants of the other machine.

"Are we?" asked Billy Worth, with a smile.

"But you needn't tear yourselves away on that account. We haven't gone yet," Dave MacLester added as Soapy said, "Drive on!"

Perhaps it was the quiet, unruffled and yet absolutely uncommunicative tones of the Auto Boys that fired Soapy Gaines' wrath. Like a pouter pigeon he swelled up. "Aw, sure, drive on!" he said to Perth, still at the wheel.

"And don't you think," he added in a low tone, still pompous but threatening, too—"And don't you think that we won't make 'em get right down on their knees to us or wish they'd never left home."

"Or both!" laughed Pickton in that unbearably rasping way.

"Yes, or both," was the response, "and some more on top of that! I'm going into this thing right, now, just for that low-down answer of Worth's if nothing else—the little two-by-four!"

"But yet—"

It was Perth who would have spoken, and it was in his mind to say that he saw nothing particularly objectionable in Billy Worth's words; that his answer to Pick's observation was natural enough.

"'But yet'? Just you keep your 'but yet' till later on. I'm talking now!" interrupted Soapy, savagely. "I'm talking now, I say!"

The fact is, indeed, that Mr. Soapy Gaines was quite apt to talk too much.

CHAPTER II

A LITTLE PRACTICE IN STRATEGY

It was a direct result of Gaines' tongue wagging much more loosely than reasonable discretion would have counseled, to say nothing of sound sense, that information concerning the scheming of himself and his fellow conspirators reached the Auto Boys.

In the first place Soapy made the boast in Knight & Wilder's garage that, when the Auto Boys set out on the tour, the object of which was shrouded in such mystery, his own car might not be so far behind but that somebody would look "about like thirty cents," when somebody arrived at somebody's very secret destination.

Again, the same afternoon, to a crowd of young fellows gathered for baseball practice

he made such broad hints concerning the Auto Boys and a mysterious spot marked by stones piled near it, many years ago, that the dullest of them could not but connect the same with the journey Phil Way and his friends were known to have in prospect.

It was the most natural thing imaginable that, being very friendly indeed with Phil, Billy, Paul and Dave, and by no means an ardent admirer of the Chosen Trio, Ed Wilder improved his earliest opportunity to tell the former of Soapy Gaines' words and half-jocular, half-threatening manner. With equal promptitude, also, a half-dozen or more of the baseball enthusiasts let it be known that, whatever the well-concealed plans and purposes of the Auto Boys might be, Gaines and Pickton, and very probably Perth, as well, had obtained information in regard to them.

Thus did Soapy's exact words, in some instances, and the substance of them in others, reach the four friends at one time and another before twenty-four hours had passed.

“Hard to tell whether they think it would be just a joke to follow after us or whether they intend to be low-down, sneaking mean,” said Phil Way, as the well-nigh inseparable quartette discussed the situation in the green and yellow garage.

“I don’t see that that’s the important thing. The main question is, how did the three of ’em find out so much,” was Billy Worth’s observation. “Of course we know that our intention to go on a trip is common property; but wherever could they have heard about ‘three stones to mark the place’? If they’ve heard enough that they make hints of that kind, how much else do they know?”

“Oh, fudge! Pay no attention to ’em, *I* say. What’s the odds whether they trail after us or don’t?” put in Dave MacLester.

“Huh! Plenty enough odds!” ejaculated Paul Jones, forcibly. “If we’d wanted them tagging along we’d have told ’em when they as good as asked us. And what’s more, if we’re going to take them into the plan we

might as well tell it to everybody and forget all about keeping our business to ourselves. But say! What's the matter with fooling 'em? Let 'em follow after us and when we've led 'em away off the real track, just slip away and go where we first intended?"

There was a general murmur of interest and some laughing over the possibilities Paul's suggestion might develop, but in the end the talk came back to Phil Way's inquiry—were the Chosen Trio bent on making serious mischief and of themselves a contemptible nuisance, or did they think merely that it would be fun to ascertain and expose the object of the contemplated journey?

"They've been spying on us some time or other or they'd never be able to drop so many hints about the Three Stones. Then again, though, that's all they have hinted at, so far as we've heard," said MacLester. "Likely they don't know about anything else. But if we are going to pay any attention at all to them, let's

do as Jones says. Let's have some fun out of it."

And so began a series of moves on the checker board of events for both the Auto Boys and the three Chosen Ones which, and particularly with regard to the latter, gave all of them something to think about.

A decoy movement was the first put into execution. Its purpose was to ascertain to what extent Soapy Gaines and his friends were keeping tab on the going and coming of the Thirty, by which name, it will be remembered, the car the four chums jointly owned was known.

With a tarpaulin tied over the rack behind, as if it covered a quantity of baggage, divers boxes—mostly empty—in the tonneau, two extra tires in their racks and the whole outfit presenting the appearance of being ready for extended touring, the Auto Boys headed their car into the street the following morning.

Amid frantic waving of their hands, and by

Jones a most ridiculous pretense of wiping away tears of parting—fairly giggling in his handkerchief as he did it—the machine was turned directly toward the Star Lake road. At good speed, yet not too fast—it wouldn't do to eliminate the certainty of being seen—the Thirty rolled into the country just as the great clock in the Court House tower rang nine.

Going with what carelessness he could assume, yet stealthily, too, through the alley at the rear of the Way and other residences on the south side of Grace Avenue, young Mr. Pickton looked in at the window of the green and yellow garage as he had done many times before within the past week. Not at all surprised was he to see the shed empty, but he was astonished and not a little chagrined to notice that the extra tires were no longer in the corner reserved for them, and various other articles of touring paraphernalia customarily stored in plain view—ropes, lantern, shovel, a large tarpaulin, and so on—were missing.

“Ginger! They're gone already!” ex-

claimed the dumbfounded Mr. Pickton, and took to his heels.

From a corner drug store in an adjacent street he telephoned the news to Soapy Gaines. The latter, no less surprised than Pickton, vented his disgust and displeasure by applying to the Auto Boys a comprehensive variety of names. One would have supposed they had done him some personal injury; at least that they had been bound by every sort of moral obligation to have notified Mr. Gaines and his friends of their intended departure.

Within a half hour Pickton and Freddy Perth were frantically working over Gaines' Roadster while that young gentleman rushed rather foolishly and very excitedly about the carriage house in which the machine was kept. (Mr. Gaines, Sr., had not yet relinquished horses.) Soapy's principal purpose, indeed, seemed to be that of getting himself in the way. In any event, he succeeded so well that young Mr. Perth, hastening to the tank with a heavy can of gasoline, collided with him violently and

both rolled upon the concrete floor, the gasoline gurgling over them as if it laughed a deep, deep, solemn laugh.

Unlike most young fellows whose privilege it is to use and care for an automobile, Soapy Gaines little relished the work. Instead of being constantly afraid his chums would have too much to do with the oiling, the lights, the fuel supply and the general keeping of the machine in good trim, as many another young fellow would have been, Gaines was the opposite—afraid only that they wouldn't.

Not to any motive of generosity was this attitude of his to be credited. Soapy just didn't like to work and, moreover, had never learned how to perform even the simplest tasks, whether in connection with the automobile or otherwise. It was a misfortune real and serious. To a great extent, however, since such learning had never been required of him, was he to be pitied rather than blamed.

Notwithstanding their various vexations, for the spilling of the gasoline was but one of sev-

eral annoying experiences, the Chosen Trio were presently spinning down the street at a rate of speed inviting unpleasant notice should a bluecoat be encountered. They were by no means equipped for an extended journey. All they hoped to do was ascertain the road the Auto Boys had taken. With this information in hand, they would return home and make ready for a long tour. It would be easy to trace the well-laden touring car once its general route beyond the city was known.

Perhaps the Auto Boys made a mistake by not slipping away quietly, this very morning, well ahead of their expected schedule. They could probably have eluded successful pursuit more easily at this time than later. And yet it must be remembered, and their own opinion in the matter was that only by a decoy movement could they assure themselves with regard to the Trio's real intentions. So all in all Phil and his friends thought they planned extremely well.

Alighting from the Thirty in the city's out-

skirts, Billy Worth had quietly returned by street car to the business district. In the seclusion of the private office of Knight & Wilder's garage he awaited developments. Nothing happening at once, he bethought himself of the telephone, and obtaining ready permission to use it, he called up Ben Ryder.

Reflecting with no small interest that, as the Ryder home was but across the street from the Gaines mansion, and Ben being a pretty wide-awake fellow and likely to be observing, also a good friend, even if he was going to college next fall, Billy was mightily pleased with himself for having thought of him. He rejoiced the more, too, when Ben—Mr. Benjamin Harrison Ryder, left tackle, if you please, sir!—but just good, honest Ben, for short, answered his summons.

“Yes, the three of them went bowling down the street in Gaines' young battleship twenty minutes ago,” was the answer to Worth's question. “Don't mention your having inquired? Why, not if you want it that way, certainly.

Might not promise so readily if I saw the thing from the same angle that makes it look so important to you. Hope you won't take offense if I say I really don't, though, Billy!"

As this laughing answer terminated the conversation, Worth scoured his brain for other sources of information. The Park Garage, and the Automobile Club were called in turn. From the first nothing was learned, but from the club came the news that Gaines and Pickton had been in the rooms to look at some road maps, leaving later to overtake Phil Way's crowd. The latter had driven out on the Star Lake road some time before. Dr. Malcom told Gaines and Pickton of having met them as he returned from a country call.

John Lawdon, the snappy young secretary of the club, always eager to be accommodating, told Billy all this without so much as asking to whom he was speaking. He had helped Pick and Soapy look over the maps, he said. Yes, Fred Perth was with them. He had seen all three drive away.

So delighted to have obtained a positive key to the Trio's movements that he could hardly say "Thank you," without betraying excitement in his voice, Billy hung up the receiver. Then he waited, but not long was he kept in suspense.

The telephone rang. Mr. Wilder's stenographer responded. "It is for you, Mr. Worth,"—with a peculiar little accent on the Mr.

It was Phil Way, calling in from Star Lake as had been agreed he should do. Promptly and with many a laugh over the success of their ruse, Billy reported all he had learned.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Phil. "We will run over a lot of cross roads and finally back to town before noon, giving them a route to trace that will keep 'em out all day."

"Hurry along! They'll be there soon!" Worth replied, eagerly. "Get a good start ahead and we'll watch for them as they come back! Let them see just a smile in the corner of an eye, you know! Better than to give 'em the laugh right out."

Almost to the letter was the plan of the Auto Boys consummated. The hitch in their program followed the early discovery by Gaines and his company that they themselves had made a serious mistake or else had been made the victims of a trick. That one or the other proposition was true dawned slowly upon them as they painfully traced the car they sought by the tracks of its wheels, or, where these were lost in the dust, by many inquiries at farm-houses and of fellow travelers upon the road.

"If it was just a low-down scheme to send us wild-goose chasing, they'll be hanging around somewhere to gloat, you bet!" Fred Perth suggested, as it became painfully apparent that the Auto Boys' machine had simply made an extended series of turns, then returned to town.

"Anyhow, it's all the more reason we've got to upset their old secret tour," said Gaines, with determination.

Pick was driving. "I'll run her around the suburbs to the South road, then up to your house through the back streets, Soapy," he

proposed. "They'll be watching for us to come in through town, if this *was* just one of their measly tricks."

"Her" being the automobile and being also a well-behaved car, "she" made no protest of any sort to the longer way home, as Pickton suggested. Soapy and Perth likewise agreeing, a half circle was made around the town. It was nearly two o'clock when the Roadster, with the water fairly boiling out of the radiator, rumbled into the Gaines carriage house.

Perhaps it was because they were not only disgusted with their fruitless journey, but very hungry as well, that the Chosen Ones unanimously agreed that, in substance, Messrs. Way, Jones, MacLester and Worth were a precious lot of rogues who thought themselves extremely smart. And it is very much to be feared, indeed, that some such feeling with regard to their mental capacity was entertained by the four friends when a couple of hours later the two parties of young gentlemen came face to face on Main Street.

But if there was in the glances of the Auto Boys an exultation which, strictly speaking, was not at all to their credit, it must be remembered that they were only human. Only human, and not so trained in the suppression of the appearance, only, of exulting over a fellow creature, as older members of the human race sometimes become.

Phil and Billy were on the way to deliver the large route of evening papers they managed every week day, and Dave and Paul to buy some supplies for the proposed trip when the opposing parties met.

"Oh, hello!" cried Paul Jones with an expansive grin.

"G'wan, you—" It was Soapy who answered, but the final word, if he completed his sentence, was lost in the noise of the street. What that word was is immaterial, perhaps. What it wasn't was made very plain by his manner and the term was certainly *not* "young gentleman," "cherished friend," or anything of that order.

“Oh, well, they had no business trying to inject themselves into our affairs,” said Billy Worth, sorry to see the bitter feeling of the three lads.

And there was really broad justification for Worth's remarks. For a large part of a year—ever since the preceding fall, and it was now June—the Auto Boys had had in contemplation the journey they were about to begin.

For reasons they deemed sufficient, their destination and their object they had revealed only in their families. All comment, all conjecture, all inquisitive or teasing words from their friends had been successfully resisted.

The curiosity of their usual associates was only heightened by this fact, and in time the secret plans of the lads were vested by their whole acquaintanceship with an importance far out of proper proportion to their probable consequence. Then came Soapy Gaines and his followers, Pickton and Perth, with frequent hints of a truly mysterious nature—“Three

stones piled one upon another to mark the place."

What place, and where? And why? And who marked it, and when?

Not only those of an age with the Auto Boys themselves but their elders as well wondered more and more as ever and again came some reference to the secret journey.

CHAPTER III

A PLAN THAT DID NOT FAIL

A number of plans for eluding Soapy Gaines and the watchful eyes of his two bosom friends did the Auto Boys formulate. None of them seemed quite satisfactory. A scheme to slip away at night was discarded as being too much like simply running away. Another, which involved the shipping of all supplies to a nearby town and really making the start from there, was considered to necessitate too great a loss of time if the goods were sent by freight and to cost more than the lads felt justified in paying if forwarded by express.

Thus, as for varying reasons every suggestion offered was at last voted undesirable, there appeared no other course than to disregard the Trio entirely. It was in the midst of this ex-

tremity that on the Saturday following the wild-goose chase on which the Roadster had been led, Pickton again asked Dave MacLester point blank when "Sinbad's next voyage" was to begin.

"Since you are so good as to inquire, and as it must make a whole lot of difference to you," answered Davy, firing up under Pick's bantering tone, "we're going to start Monday afternoon. If there's anything else you'd like to know, just mention it."

"Say! *Are* you going to leave Monday?" asked Pickton, doubtingly.

"If it's perfectly convenient to you, we really would like to get away at that time," MacLester answered witheringly. Then fearing he had said too much, he added: "Of course we might come back the same day. Such things have happened."

Pick received this reference to the fruitless chase of a few days previous with a contemptuous "A-h-w!" Yet he went away pretty well satisfied that Monday was the chosen day.

A half hour later, Dave related at the green and yellow shed under the elms all that had been said.

"Don't see what you meant by speaking out that way!" growled Billy Worth. "They'll just be watching all the closer!"

"Yes, sir! They'll be watching all the more," cried Phil Way, with sudden enthusiasm, "and I have a scheme that I think will work." Then in the lowest undertones he told his plan.

In undertones filled with joyous anticipation, also, the suggestion advanced was elaborated upon. And when the four chums separated, each knew just what he must do, and there is no doubt whatever that at this juncture they would not have had Gaines, Pickton and Freddy Perth abandon their plan of pursuit if but a word would have persuaded them to do so. No! The prospect of vanquishing them and of leaving them chagrined and humiliated was quite too delightful to think of

the circumstances being other than just as they were.

Monday came. Phil Way and Paul Jones were out in the car when the work of the morning had been finished. Billy Worth was occupied with the lawn mower at his own home and Dave was somewhat similarly engaged in the MacLester family garden. All of these facts the Chosen Trio had gathered in good season. Quite satisfied with the situation, they took the Roadster out for a spin, intent upon the whereabouts of Phil and Paul in the Thirty.

Keeping a sharp eye on all the automobiles in view, the three youths presently turned toward the Ravine road, for it was one the Auto Boys used a great deal. They often went to Tyler Gleason's farm, a short drive beyond the city. Phil and Paul had gone there this very morning, in fact.

And what was this? Soapy Gaines burst suddenly into a laugh not unlike a conqueror's war-whoop and Pickton and Perth joined in his

mirth in scarcely less demonstrative fashion.

The Thirty of the Auto Boys was being "towed in."

Yes, it was true. As the Roadster came close, the Chosen Ones found their first glimpse of the predicament of the enemy fully verified. There was George Knight in his big six-cylinder, with Phil Way, glum and silent, in the seat beside him, while tied by ropes behind they hauled the four-cylinder car of the Auto Boys. Paul Jones, steering the car in tow, seemed to be trying to look indifferent—as if he didn't care.

"Give ye a lift?" cried Tom Pickton, slowing up. He was not alone in his anxiety to know how seriously the Thirty was out of commission.

"No, thank you!" Phil Way answered distantly, as Mr. Knight drove ahead without pause or comment.

It is interesting to note how quickly the Gaines party discovered that they were themselves ready to turn toward the city.

This they did, and until town was reached they loafed along a considerable distance in the rear of the towed machine, yet keeping that car plainly in view. In the light of subsequent developments, too, it is interesting to record the zealous watchfulness of the three exultant young gentlemen as they saw the crippled car hauled into Knight & Wilder's garage.

Lacking nothing in brazen audacity, Pickton alighted from the Roadster and, standing in the doorway of the automobile establishment, noted with evident relish that Mr. Wilder, the mechanical genius of the concern, looked very sober and puckered his lips up quite despairingly as he lifted the Thirty's bonnet and seemed carefully to inspect the motor. He spoke a few words to Phil and Paul, then some men came and pushed the Auto Boys' machine through the storage rooms into the repair shop.

An expressive and by no means unhappy smile shone on Pick's countenance—a really disagreeable smile, it was, in those hawk-like eyes of his,—as he climbed into Gaines' ma-

chine. Perth was driving,—Soapy rarely ever held the wheel himself—and as the car moved off, all three noticed the evidently disconsolate feelings of Phil and Paul as the latter two emerged from the garage and started homeward on foot.

“Guess maybe that don’t simplify matters some!” chuckled Freddy Perth. “Instead of having to watch the whole bunch of ’em, all we need do now is keep our eyes on their shed at Way’s to see when they get the machine home again.”

“Watch the garage, too!” Gaines put in. “They’ll run around to try out some as soon as they get fixed up. Hang it! Why didn’t you push right up and see what the matter was, Pick?”

Young Mr. Pickton, although considerably irritated by this question, merely said: “Sure! We’ve got to watch the garage! Wilder wouldn’t tell us anything, though, if we asked him! Knight, either. Remember when I inquired what was wrong with Crossley’s limou-

sine, the day it was run in there? 'Who wants to know?' Wilder says. 'Well, I do,' I told him. 'Guess it's the referendum,' he said with never even a grin. Humph! Knight's just about as accommodating as that, too. There's nothing to it but watch for the old boat when they get it to running again. Perth, you go down through the alley and peek into Way's shed about supper time."

Freddy said he would and added the suggestion that the Trio could spend the afternoon at the ball game; that, particularly since their machine was laid up, Way and his crowd would most likely be there. The proposal met with general approval.

A great deal relieved to feel that their vigilance might safely be relaxed for the present were the Chosen Ones as they journeyed to the ball grounds in good season. Sure enough, there were the Auto Boys,—Paul and Phil, at least, standing in line for tickets.

"MacLester and Worth are working some place. You can pretty near count on that.

It's their steady system," whispered Pickton, as with Gaines and Perth he fell into line before the ticket window, then a minute later joined the rush through the gate.

And "There they go in!" whispered Paul Jones to Phil, his smile, always expansive, becoming almost alarmingly broad. "They saw us in line and never noticed us sidestep to the window," he added in triumphant manner.

"They think we went inside all right," Phil answered. "Trouble is we don't know whether they'll find out we didn't. It's the only drawback to this scheme. They'll be suspicious if they discover we aren't there. Only thing for it is quick action."

Already the two boys were walking rapidly down a side street. Turning the corner they reached the car line a few blocks from the ball park. From a neighborhood grocer's establishment Phil telephoned instructions to Billy Worth in waiting at Knight & Wilder's. Then, while Paul boarded the first city-bound car, he returned to the ball game.

Very careful was Mr. Philip Way to take note before going inside that Gaines' Roadster was still alongside the curb. Also careful was he to station himself where he could see all who came and went. In short, he was so occupied in these and similar matters concerning the whereabouts of that eminently select party of three, self styled as Chosen, that his thoughts were a long way from the baseball game now in progress. But then the game was one-sided and slow; maybe that was the reason Phil evinced so little interest.

With others of the great throng Way left the grounds when the very lame exhibition was over. A good many were growling about "a mighty poor article of ball," and "village hay tossers;" but Phil made no complaint. The game had served one purpose almost as well as the decisive battle of a pennant series could have done. He even laughed, though inwardly, as he overheard Fred Perth say, "Why, there's Way, now!"

As if quite by chance Phil was walking past

the Roadster as its owner and his friends prepared to turn that lumbering vehicle homeward. Even when Gaines sang out, "Oh, I say! The walking's pretty good!" which comment was plainly meant for his ears, he made no answer beyond a deprecating wave of his hand. Not even did he look around—at that time, but he did assure himself of the direction the Trio took and that their manner was that of unsuspecting confidence.

Or perhaps Paul Jones' expression, as Phil told all about it afterward, fits the situation better. "There never was a better case of asleep at the switch," said Paul. And maybe he was right.

Was it merely a coincidence that the Trio in the Roadster twice passed Way's home before supper and again just afterward? Once Phil was on the porch. Once he was loitering near the low, green and yellow garage, now so empty and bare but for the workbench and tools of many kinds, and the desk in one corner.

Later, when the long June day was over,

when the sun had set and the good-night twittering of the birds sounded unusually loud and clear as darkness gathered, Way busied himself inside the shed. The big front doors were wide open, to admit the air, no doubt. All three electric lamps in the small building were burning bright.

If Freddy Perth had only known it, in fact, he could have seen from the street that the automobile was not in the home garage at all and that Phil was. He might have saved himself the walk through the dusty alley, and still have made the same report to Gaines and Pickton, the substance of which was that the Thirty was still at Knight & Wilder's and that its owners were at their respective homes. At least Way was for he had seen him.

But if Perth or Pickton or Soapy Gaines, himself, or all three, for that matter, had chanced to board a certain limited suburban trolley car an hour later, the same evening, they might have been surprised to discover that although Phil *had* been at home he was not at

home now. And, also, if appearances were not altogether deceptive, that he had no intention of being again at home in the immediate future. For an extra large suitcase was on the floor before him and a motor coat draped the back of his seat.

"Round trip?" said the conductor when Phil asked the fare to Littleton.

"No, one way," he answered.

"Forty cents," the conductor said. "Ain't bad for twenty-five miles. Cheaper'n automobile travel, at that."

"Oh, cheaper, possibly," said Phil Way, "but—"

CHAPTER IV

SAFELY AWAY

“They’re going to go soon, if they go at all. Likely would have started to-day, as MacLester said, if their machine hadn’t played out,” said Tom Pickton, when on this Monday evening he and Perth were leaving Gaines at his home. “We’ll watch ’em to-morrow, all right!” declared Mr. Pickton earnestly.

And now if Pick is as good as his word, if he and his fellow conspirators are really watching the Auto Boys, as another day comes, it is an interesting and busy scene that falls upon their gaze.

Phil Way is looking over every part of the Thirty’s oiling system. “It’s too bad we had to put the faithful old machine in the humiliating plight of being towed in, even if there

never was a thing the matter with her," says he.

"And you ought to've seen Phil! Never saw him appear so broken up! Honest, I just hurt from holding in when the three of them drove by us, as if they thought they were 'it,' hollering out, 'Give ye a lift?' in that sarcastic way of Pick's! And when they were 'way past, maybe I didn't laugh!"

Paul Jones was the speaker, strapping a suitcase to the car's running board as he talked. Billy Worth and Dave MacLester were occupied in the rearrangement of a lot of other baggage, the canvas of a tent among the rest, in the tonneau. The car stood just outside a large frame building in the rear of the Yorkshire House, the principal hotel of Littleton.

A combined livery stable and garage was this frame structure, if one judged by appearances, for it housed both horse-drawn vehicles and automobiles. Of the latter there were three—two runabouts and a light touring car.

The Auto Boys' machine appeared to have been kept here over night. By their further conversation it was evident, too, that the young gentlemen themselves had remained over night in the Yorkshire House, and into that hostelry they repaired a few minutes later for an exceptionally early breakfast.

"Too early for any earthly use. I don't see no sense in it," the not fastidiously tidy cook of the establishment stated at least five or six times to the maid who waited on table; and who, it may be added, quite agreed with him until she found a nickel tied in the corner of each napkin after the very early guests had left. As a matter of fact, it was exactly five o'clock.

And now again, if Mr. Thomas Pickton, still sound asleep in his bed at home, had been watching the Auto Boys, as he had stated would be faithfully done to-day, he would have saved himself and friends a rather humiliating disappointment at a later time. But, as has also been plainly indicated, Pick, with all his

hawk-like eyes, saw nothing of what was taking place, and as Freddy Perth and Soapy Gaines were not a whit more wide awake than he at this hour of five A. M., the well-laden Thirty with its four owners aboard purred merrily westward, farther and farther from the small town of appropriate name, and farther yet from Lannington.

“Guess they have to get up in the morning some to get ahead of us,” observed Mr. Paul Jones, with a sigh of satisfaction. And it would certainly appear that he was right, though he did rub his eyes considerably and though his sigh stretched out to the extent of a great yawn only a few seconds later.

Thus was the *Auto Boys' Quest* under way at last. Away back at the great, empty farmhouse where Grandfather Beaman once lived, the first plans for this trip had been laid. Those of you who have read *The 'Auto Boys' Outing* will recall the circumstances. You will remember the days of zestful fun and tranquil rest the lads had, following the solution of the

mystery of the strange characters on Grandfather Beaman's wooden leg, the disclosure of Jonas Tagg's evil designs and the discovery of the identity of "Little Mystery."

And do you recollect the pleasant evenings on the old front door step? There it was that the trip to the great Ship woods was first suggested, and there it was that the solemn agreement, making the whole expedition a secret, was entered into.

Going back a little farther, it will not be necessary to remind readers of *The Auto Boys*, the first story of this series, that for purely business reasons the four friends had made it a practice not to talk publicly of their joint ventures. Even the "Retreat" in Gleason's Ravine, was known to few outside the immediate families of the boys. Just how they had managed, as the "Young American Contract Company," to acquire their automobile and start the passenger service to Star Lake, with all the exciting adventures resulting therefrom, was, likewise, a subject the young men did not

publicly discuss, although of course the main facts had in time become quite commonly known.

One reason the four chums were so successful in confining within the limits of their respective households and to their very nearest friends knowledge of their plans and undertakings was that there was nothing of the brag-gart in any of them. Phil Way, usually the leader in their various ventures, whether for purposes of fun or business, was a tall, slender, brown-haired, clear-eyed and mild-mannered chap. At the time of the history herein related he is well past fifteen years of age. His father is a physician, by no means rich, but in very comfortable circumstances.

Billy Worth, fun-loving and jolly, but an earnest young fellow, too, is a little younger than Phil and in general appearance quite his opposite, being short and stout. Yet let none suppose that that stocky frame of his carries an ounce of anything but bone, muscle and good, red blood—good, red blood that glows in

his cheeks, and helps to place that alert, snappy expression in his twinkling brown eyes. So much for William Worth, Junior. William Worth, Senior, it may be stated, is engaged in machinery manufacturing.

A member of this quartette of friends I am sure you will like is Paul Jones—slight, slender, audacious. He has been in long trousers less than a year. He wears his motor cap far back on his head and rakishly low on one side. His sandy hair, thus quite prominently exposed to view, is in a more or less tousled condition a greater part of the time. Of a care-free disposition is young Mr. Jones, however, and the rumpled state of his hair bothers him not at all. It was brushed this morning, and, "Goodness, gracious! Can you expect a man's hair always to be just so?" Why, probably not. Then again, a good deal depends on the "man."

Forgive a great deal to Paul. If he lacks something in general refinement and polish as compared to the other boys, it is because his advantages have not equaled theirs. Being an

orphan, he has missed much his friends have received, though Mrs. Wilby, his sister, and John Wilby, her husband, have given the otherwise homeless lad the best their limited time and means afford.

Dave MacLester is of still another type. Nearly as tall as Phil, he is much heavier. He lacks the power of quick perception and quick movements common to his three friends, but outranks any one of them in strength. He is a dark-haired chap of Scotch descent and if he is just a little slow, he is at least sure. His fault, if fault it may be called, is a certain moodiness of disposition, apt to reveal itself at times in his hopeless, pessimistic view of things. Maybe it would be more accurate to describe this characteristic as his misfortune. He is at fault in regard to it only to the extent that he neglects or fails to strive against his naturally gloomy or irritated mental condition, and so eventually grow entirely away from it.

One interesting fact about all the boys is the bond of union among them. Petty differences

have arisen scores of times, of course; wordy disputes have occurred less frequently; but for a long, long time the four have been almost inseparable, both in work and in play, their unwritten motto being, "the best interests of one are the best interests of all." Unselfishly every pleasure is shared, and uncomplainingly in every task and duty each fellow does his share.

The escape from the watchful eyes of Soapy Gaines and his followers with the car and its load of baggage for this present expedition was brought about only because each one of the four worked in faithful harmony with the general plan. What this plan was, has already become apparent.

That the towing in of the Thirty to Knight & Wilder's garage was but a pretense to throw the Trio off their guard, you have probably guessed from the beginning. It would be interesting, perhaps, to hear at length how Billy and Dave rushed the automobile to the home garage upon receiving word by 'phone that the Gaines party had been lured into the ball game

and forgetfulness, but more important matters are waiting.

Let this part of the history be summed up briefly, then, by recording only the bare facts that, with the help of Paul, who did not remain at the baseball park, it will be remembered, Worth and MacLester loaded the automobile with camp outfit and baggage and were safely beyond the city all within two hours.

By a circuitous route, avoiding the streets most used for motor traffic, the three reached the country roads. Here, too, they chose the least traveled thoroughfares until fully ten miles had been placed between them and Lan-nington.

Even by the longer route, Littleton, nearly forty miles distant, might have been reached before dark; but to attract the least possible notice they lingered in little frequented roads, and ran quietly into the Yorkshire House garage and stable just after sundown. So was the car, laden down with the evidences of an

extensive expedition, and well calculated to attract much notice, housed for the night.

The three boys believed they had been observed by not one person likely to mention having seen them—at least to anyone from whom, directly or indirectly, the Trio would obtain intelligence of their movements. They told Phil as much, and with evident satisfaction, when they met him upon his arrival by suburban trolley car, later in the evening.—And now another day had come. The Auto Boys were in the best of spirits as they left the lately risen sun and Littleton in their rear.

“‘Westward the Star of Empire takes its way,’” quoted Billy Worth, waving his cap zestfully, as the automobile bowled smoothly along, MacLester at the wheel.

“‘Takes its Way and also its Worth, and MacLester and Jones,’” shouted Paul, with that expansive grin which never failed to bring a smile from any sort of person disposed to be half-way good-natured.

“Say, Jones, they’ve hung people out in the Ship woods country for horse-stealing, and that’s hardly a misdemeanor compared to such downright atrocities as you perpetrate! Goodness! That was bad!” declared Dave. He always did like to have a fling at Paul. “The best pun is horrible, but a poor one!—”

“What did you say about the ‘breast bone’ Mac?” shouted Jones, from the tonneau, with admirable pretense of having caught but two words and caught neither of those correctly, as the car whizzed forward. Then, almost without pause, “Yes, I like the white meat, too!” he sang out.

“White meat? Don’t mention it! I’m positively starving,” Worth put in, and in a twinkling the whole conversation changed to the subject of the noonday lunch and what the car’s larder afforded. Paul’s hearing improved very greatly, at once, by the way.

“Why, we have a cheese-box full of cold ham and buns and baked beans and pickles and a

cake and cheese and pie and—" Jones enumerated; then MacLester, quickly going forward with the inventory, as Paul paused for breath, added:

"Sardines, bananas, olives and potato chips, and I'll bet half the stuff will spoil on our hands."

"Risk it!" Phil Way observed in the tone of one who speaks from experience. And somewhat later when a halt was made for luncheon, weighty evidence was presented that if any risk whatever existed it was extremely slight. The very hour appropriated to a noonday purpose was strong testimony—not yet eleven o'clock. However, breakfast had been extremely early, it will be remembered.

With a great deal more haste than ceremony, the roadside repast being finished, dishes and food were packed away again and the automobile sent once more bounding forward. Nearly fifty miles onward lay the little town of Sagersgrove and here the Auto Boys expected to re-

ceive information direct from Lannington concerning the movements of Gaines, Pickton and Perth.

How much or how little those young gentlemen may have discovered by this time, and what their intentions might be, were matters of marked interest to the chums who had so cleverly outwitted them. They were more than pleased with themselves, therefore, that their foresight had prompted the making of arrangements with Mr. Knight to send a telegram to Sagersgrove to be received upon reaching there.

That Knight & Wilder shared the secret of the four boys it is almost needless to say. Even to knowledge of the destination and the real purpose of the journey the garage proprietors had been taken into confidence. They were good, reliable friends, to begin with, and as the location of the Ship woods was remote from sources of automobile supplies, it might be necessary to send to them for repairs. And as both men had shown a lively interest in the

enterprise now under way, it was quite certain Mr. Knight would not fail to have news of some kind awaiting the travelers at the point agreed upon.

Meanwhile the probable and possible discoveries of the Chosen Three and what their ultimate plans would be were discussed over and over again. Even if Gaines and his followers should learn the direction the Thirty had taken—even if they chanced upon the discovery that the party had spent the night in Littleton—they would still be unable to so much as guess the direction taken next.

Again, even if the Trio had any knowledge of the great Ship forest they would have no reason for supposing the four friends to be bent on reaching that wilderness. All the information the Gaines crowd had, so far as known, and the thing which so seriously pricked their curiosity, was that sentence they had somehow overheard, "Three stones piled one on top of another to mark the place."

"They could connect that and the big woods

if they knew where we were heading for; but by itself the talk of the three stones gives them nothing to go by," urged Billy Worth. He had put the same thought into slightly different words at least a half-dozen times before and the others had done no less. But there was no cause to doubt his reasoning.

"Three stones piled one on top of another" might be used to mark many and many different sorts of places. They might be in town. They might be in the country, in pasture or meadow; beside a lake in the valley, or on the summit of the hills. Again, what reason why they might not be in the heart of a great forest?

The Ship woods comprised such a forest. Its very name was derived from the fact that for long years great timbers for ship building purposes had been cut there. In one part or another of its vast expanse men were at work the whole year through, sawing, chopping, hewing. A single "stick" from the forest's depths might measure more than one hundred feet in length by three feet or more each way,

in thickness. Perhaps four teams of horses would be used to haul such a piece of timber out of the woods and to the railroad siding where it was loaded for transportation to the owners' mills, many miles away.

The fact that those who owned the forest did live a long distance from it, naturally left the vast tract in the hands of only such men as were employed in cutting the big "sticks." And as the latter were little interested in anything more than the trees that would do for their purposes, the woods was for the most part regarded as pretty nearly public property. That is to say, no one so much as thought of asking permission to go there, to camp, to hunt, to pick blackberries, or anything of the kind.

Nor was anyone expected to do so, for that matter. The boss timber man and the crews which handled the saws, and axes, the heavy chains, the canthooks and all the paraphernalia of their hard, hard work, asked no questions of trespassers. They warned hunters against leaving campfires burning and against drop-

ping lighted matches in the leaves. They would permit no one to chop into or otherwise injure a tree which might make "timber" then or later; but in general the occasional stranger who visited these wilds was as free to come to hunt, to fish, to build a brush shack or camp, or to gather firewood, herbs or poles or bark—to do almost as he pleased in short—and as free to go away again, as he would have been in the unclaimed forest of a new country.

All this information and much more the Auto Boys had gathered. Plans for their trip had been under way all winter. In imagination they had often pictured the wild, rugged scenery of the locality. Working and talking together, they had built for themselves a kind of aircastle on the banks of the swift, cold and rock-strewn stream skirting the edge of the big woods, in which, at least figuratively, they lived. They had seen themselves in their tent, the automobile in a shelter close by, and a little fire lighted to drive mosquitoes away, many and many an evening together, while still the

snow lay deep and the tinkle and gurgle of the swift-flowing stream were smothered beneath the ice.

Possibly it is true that in anticipation there is more pleasure than in realization, yet few people actually believe it. Certainly Phil Way and his friends did not. They had anticipated a lot of fun in this tour now under way at last, but one of its merriest features they had not foreseen at all. This was the keen delight they had in having given Gaines, Pickton and Perth the slip so nicely. Indeed, their self-satisfaction over this incident was quite beyond measure, and Dave MacLester found no support whatever when he advanced a supposition that the telegram to be picked up in Sagersgrove would say the Chosen Ones were in pursuit and probably not far behind.

"Anyhow, we'll know all about it in about two and a half flicks of a bobolink's tail," said Billy Worth, "for if that church spire up over the trees yonder isn't Sagersgrove, I'm blind,"

Fortunately, then, for young Mr. Worth's eyes, the spire rising above the banks of green a half mile beyond, was that of the Methodist church of the town he named. In a very brief time it had been reached, also, and from a very neat and clean old gentleman, who might have been the preacher himself, although he was mowing the small church lawn, the lads inquired their way to the telegraph office.

Fortunately, again, it was not at all difficult to find one's way about in Sagersgrove. The telegraph office was in the wing of the operator's home, "down the street two blocks, then turn to your left two blocks—a little brown house, set low to the ground. You'll see the white and blue sign."

Three minutes later Phil Way emerged from the side door of the identical house the old gentleman described. He held up to expectant view a yellow envelope, then opened the same, and, one foot on the running board, read in a low tone:

To Phil Way and Party, Sagersgrove.

Know you have gone. Don't know where.
Rushing around crazy.

"Wow!" yelled Paul Jones, with cheery emphasis. Which expression, although seeming to betray no very great depth of intellect, or to communicate any very particular intelligence, did appear to express the feelings of the Auto Boys to a nicety.

CHAPTER V

CAMPING ON A STRANGE ROAD

Jubilant and expressive though it may have been, Paul Jones' "wow," was very far from being all the Auto Boys had to say concerning the telegram received. In general they shared Paul's mirthful feelings. With a very human kind of pleasure they let their minds dwell upon Gaines' sullen wrath and Pickton's chagrin and disappointment.

The condition of bewilderment and utter discomfiture which would be natural to Freddy Perth was also easily imagined. In short, it was with real delight that the boys pictured the Trio confronted by the discovery that they had been out-generaled; left like a squad of raw recruits hopelessly drilling around the field,

looking for the beginning of the battle that was all over long ago.

"Oh, I guess maybe they don't find *their* cake is dough, and they couldn't eat it if they kept it," chuckled Paul, blithely, but really somewhat twisted as to the quotations he meant to employ. "But anyhow, the thing for us to do is keep moving. We're getting too much noticed. It'll lead to more advertising than we'd really like to have."

This reference to a considerable number of pairs of eyes now scrutinizing the travel-stained car, its touring and camp equipment and the owners thereof, caused Billy, now at the wheel, to drive slowly up the street.

Dave MacLester, who had gone into a livery stable close by to inquire about the roads to the westward, came out just in time to see the machine move off. Not guessing Billy's intentions, which were to go only to the next corner above, as a good place to turn, he dashed frantically after the car. He sprang aboard and climbed into the tonneau breathlessly.

“Don’t seem to be in any hurry at all!” he ejaculated, witheringly. “Go straight ahead. Turn at the first corner. It’s the best road west. Other one’s all torn up for four miles out, they said.”

Billy had put on speed at once, when Dave was safely in, and now he let the speedometer mark up to twenty-five on a fine stretch of brick pavement, clear of car tracks and broken by few intersecting streets, a speedway not to be resisted.

The net result of the flying start and apparent haste was not a little comment on part of those who had gathered near the car. Even the men in the livery stable ran out to see and learn what the commotion was all about and the town marshal sauntered up just a moment later.

Now the marshal of Sagersgrove was a self-important old fellow named Wellock. His uniform consisted principally of a badge of great size and a greasy blue coat with brass buttons. He wore old and rusty black trousers, very

baggy at the knees and much frayed around the bottom.

With a solemn and knowing look Marshal Wellock made a few inquiries concerning the car which had just passed out of sight and its occupants. Then he made some mysterious entries in a pocket memorandum, the generally soiled appearance of which was not at all unlike his own. These movements alone were enough to make a deep impression upon the crowd which had now collected; but accompanied as they were by Mr. Wellock's knowing and extremely mysterious air, the whole effect was to produce in the minds of those gathered near the profound conviction that the four strange boys were nothing short of bank-robbers in disguise.

Men exchanged looks of deep significance as if saying, "I told you so." Women nodded their heads to one another in a way that plainly indicated their certain knowledge of the guilt of the young strangers, whatever might be the crime laid at their door.

Observing the unlimited notice he was attracting, Marshal Wellock's importance increased. Preserving still his deeply mysterious air, he walked on to the telegraph office and went in. What he learned there apparently did not cause him to change his very good opinion of himself and of the great power vested in him, for he was more darkly mysterious than ever as he returned. Indeed, his whole bearing was such as to make him decidedly red in the face, as he frowned savagely, in keeping with his idea of the great personage which he himself felt and, he believed, everyone else must undoubtedly consider him to be. What he thought he knew about the four boys would have made a long story. What he did know could have been told in a dozen words and none of them to the lads' discredit.

Meanwhile the Thirty still sped on westward. The afternoon was waning and the road was growing bad. Sagersgrove lay far in the rear.

"Don't look to me as if this could be the main route," said Phil Way, thoughtfully

noting the brush-grown fields and the poor character of the farmhouses and buildings, becoming more and more infrequent as they progressed.

"Oh, it's the road all right. It'll be better going soon," MacLester answered; and as the latter himself had obtained the information respecting the route, Phil said no more.

Mile after mile slipped to the rear, but slowly now, for the road was a constant succession of deep ruts, miniature mountain chains and great, half-dried holes of mud. The late June sun was going down. Blackbirds flew in noisy flocks from one to another of the dense thickets growing in frequent and extensive patches as far as eye could reach over the low land at either side of the wretched way.

"Well, if this *is* the road, we better go where it isn't," muttered Billy Worth, his arms beginning to feel the effects of driving over the painfully distressing course.

"Oh, stop your growling!" Dave answered a little savagely. "This road will be all right

when we get to the high ground where the trees are yonder! And by the Old Harry! Why should you hold me responsible? Never knew it to fail, anyhow, that whoever it is that half breaks his neck and nearly gets left behind, to dig up the road statistics for a trip or any part of one, is from that minute blamed right and left for every hole that's found and for every stone that's struck."

In which observation young Mr. MacLester was not at all wrong. Identically the same weakness of human nature crops out in so many places that none can fail to recognize it. Phil Way saw and felt the truth of Dave's remarks at once.

"Does look better on ahead. Can't expect good going all the time," he said. It was a way of his. He had turned aside and prevented storms which might have grown to serious proportions among the four in just such manner time upon time.

Nevertheless, the promised improvement did

not come with the higher places to which the rough trail in due time led. Two parallel ruts among the grass and low underbrush were all that now remained to indicate a road of any sort. Now, too, a thick woods, without so much as a fence between, bounded the course on both sides. The sun was lost to view, the late twilight of a June night was closing in. For nearly two hours not a human habitation had been seen.

Away to the east stretched the swampy brush-grown country that had bordered the line of progress for many miles. To the west there appeared only the scarcely passable path leading deeper and deeper into the forest, hemming in the course on north and south.

Billy had brought the car to a halt. Unmistakably the Auto Boys were as nearly lost as one can well be on a public highway—(but there are many just such)—of a prosperous and wealthy commonwealth.

“Anyhow it makes me think that I always

was fond of white meat," chirped Paul Jones, trying to put a cheerful countenance upon a truly depressing situation.

"If you don't mind a suggestion, Jones, I'd say that it's better not to talk of what you aren't likely to get," put in Phil Way, a little soberly. "Just some of that ham and bread and butter and beans sounds good to me. So if Billy will make some coffee we can go into camp pretty comfortably right here. In the morning we can go back, if we can't do anything else."

"Gee! I always did like chicken, though!" persisted Jones, as if Melancholy had marked him for her own, and there was no remedy for his feelings but the refreshment he mentioned.

"Here, too! If we had a good supper, it would brace us all up," Worth put in.

"Shucks! We'll *have* a good supper," remonstrated Phil, impatiently. "Who'll get some water? Wish I knew where. Come on, Dave! Likely there's a good, clear creek just

over this rise of ground. You make the fire, Paul."

So Way and MacLester started off with a bucket while Chef Billy set to work with his provisions. In five minutes Jones had a bright fire blazing beside an old log, where an open, grassy place offered comfortable seats upon the ground, then he began unloading such baggage as would probably be needed. Yet every minute or two he would trot around to where Worth's supper preparations were in progress, sniffing the air, and smiling in a most delighted state of anticipation. "And won't Way be surprised!" he said. "Just listen to me when he comes back."

At last Phil and Dave did come. They had been obliged to go a long way to reach the valley and the stream they knew must be there, and it was now quite dark.

The embers of the fire glowed brightly, offering a truly comfortable sense of companionship. In the bright glow's midst stood the big

coffee pot which had seen service many times before, also a tightly covered, black roasting-pan. The two boys put down the bucket, borne between them on a short pole and Way at once busied himself in opening up a big bale of bedding.

"All-I-wants-is-my-chicken," half sang, half chanted Paul Jones.

"Oh, forget it!" drawled Phil, impatiently, creating a laugh—perhaps because it was not often he descended to plain, unvarnished slang. "You've been talking chicken all day. My! that coffee smells good," he added, just to take the rough edge off his speech.

"A nice drumstick and a slice or two of white meat. U-m-m!" sighed Jones, as if he certainly would expire directly if his wish were not gratified.

An impatient growl from Phil elicited another laugh in which Jones joined with greatest merriment. Then in another moment—

"Come on, here! Get your festal board ready!" commanded Chef Billy and directly he

drew the black, covered pan from the coals and lifted the lid. Ah, what savory smell was that! Chicken—roast chicken, and positively no mistake about it.

“Say!” This ejaculation, his face lighted up bright as the blazing coals, was all Phil could muster.

“Well, I guess maybe we’re no wizards! No, we’re no wizards—nothing like that at all,” chirped Paul Jones in his peculiarly happy way. “No! Don’t take a wizard to do these little tricks! Don’t think it for a minute!”

“Where ever *did* you get that chicken?” demanded Phil, completely puzzled. “This is what your talking about white meat meant, is it?”

Then they told him how Mrs. Tyler Gleason, whose good friendship they had won out on the farm the year before, sent the chicken, all nicely roasted, expressly for the expedition. All four lads had been at the farm and at the “Retreat” in the ravine on Sunday afternoon and in confidence told Mr. and Mrs. Gleason of their plan

to start their journey on Monday. The unexpected but very welcome contribution to their stock of provisions arrived but an hour before the car was loaded. Phil being so busily engaged in putting the blinders over the eyes of the too-confident Trio, had not, of course, known of the gift. The others saved the fowl for supper purposely to surprise him.

“Nothing to do but warm it up, and way off here on the edge of nowhere, we have as fine a roast chicken as ever came down the pike,” quoth Billy Worth. And although it must be admitted that any roast chicken pursuing its way upon the pike, or any other roadway, would be nothing short of extraordinary, the fact remains that Mrs. Gleason’s offering was all that could be desired.

Always master of ceremonies in such matters, Billy did the carving and a good-sized thimble would have contained all that remained of the roast fowl, apart from the dismembered skeleton, when supper was over. The best way to pick a bone really right up to the last shred,

inclusive, never was with knife and fork, anyway.

Ample quantities of coffee, bread and butter and the other good things the regular store of the cheese-box larder afforded, made the entire supper so successful that, on the whole, the boys contemplated their situation with no serious misgivings as they gathered about the campfire. The croaking of the frogs in the broad expanse of swamp and marsh land to the east, the profound quiet, and intense darkness in the woods on either side, the flickering lights and shadows of the blaze before them, were well calculated to inspire dread and apprehension if not downright fear; but so used to depending upon themselves—so self-reliant, therefore, were these four friends that the thought of being fearful or allowing themselves to be uncomfortable on account of their lonely surroundings, lost though they practically were, did not occur to one of them. So much, then, for the worth of a clear conscience and the habit of self-confidence.

And again, notwithstanding their somber surroundings and the annoying lack of knowledge as to their precise whereabouts, the four friends were by no means without equipment to make themselves quite comfortable. Long winter evening discussions, plans and preparations had not been for nothing. Even to rubber-covered sleeping bags which, just as an experiment, perhaps, would have made a pouring rain something to be invited rather than feared, the camp and touring outfit was complete. Just for one night it was not worth while to put up the tent or to unpack a large part of the car's load, but blankets to spread upon the ground, others for covering, and a tarpaulin for the car, were all within easy reach.

Drowsiness came early, under the influence of the fire's genial warmth and in the midst of Paul's voluble discourse on the probable extent of time lost, due to losing the road, the other boys drew their blankets over them and with a laugh bade him good-night. There being

“nothing else for P. Jones, Esquire, to do,” as he himself expressed it, he, also “sought the arms of Morpherus Nodinski.”

Again quoting the words of “P. Jones, Esquire,” it must be “that frogs sleep all day, for how else can they stay up to holler all night?” Certainly there was little diminishing of the weird clamor from the marshes as the night advanced. All else was still as death. Not even an owl disturbed the forest’s dark solitude.

And the Auto Boys slept on. The greater part of the night had passed, but no glimmer of dawn had yet appeared when there came suddenly like a wail of dire distress, louder far than the frogs’ deep croaking, a long drawn-out cry—“Help!” And again and yet again, “Help! Help!”

Dave was the first awakened. The second call completely roused him and he had the whole camp astir in another five seconds. Once more, and thrice repeated, came the wailing, drawn-out cry.

CHAPTER VI

ON TO THE GOLD CUP RACES

“Yes, sir, they have went. I don’t know nothing else about it,” spoke the young fellow employed as general utility man in Knight & Wilder’s garage. His principal work consisted of polishing metal and pumping up tires, but laboring under an impression that he was an automobile salesman, he put on very swaggering airs. Just now he affected scarcely to notice three boys who made inquiry concerning the proposed tour of Phil Way and his friends.

Mr. Knight, coming up at the moment, told the important young gentleman in an undertone that his deportment in the establishment was not that of publicity. Such being the case, he sent the youth to gather up some tools which a touring party had borrowed and left lying

on the curb, as was certainly very good of them and very honest.

Then Mr. Knight quizzed the three lads, who were none other than Gaines, Pickton and Perth. It appeared, he said, with a sly smile, that Phil Way and his party had gone away on a trip. Then he asked them about their own plans, but they knew his friendliness toward the four chums too well to divulge a great deal. Still, they could not help showing the chagrin they felt upon learning that the Auto Boys had really departed the preceding day.

Seeing their ill-humor in the matter the senior partner of the establishment made various remarks to the effect that none but the most active and alert individuals could expect to cope successfully with such clever chaps as Billy Worth, Phil Way, MacLester and Jones. Indeed, he was of the opinion, he said, that no one—referring to no person in particular, of course—but in general, *no one*,—need feel disturbed if Phil Way and his crowd of fellows did get ahead of him or them; because Phil

and Billy and the others were really exceptionally able men,—in fact, quite out of the ordinary with regard to intelligence and good judgment.

The whole effect of Mr. Knight's discourse, as he no doubt intended, was to make Gaines really sour, Pickton's vanity decidedly ruffled and Freddy Perth deeply humiliated, sick at heart and ready to admit that he was no match for such fellows as Way had gathered about him.

"Oh, come on!" growled Pick, at last, and when a half minute later the three were again in Gaines' Roadster at the curb outside, he slammed in the clutch so violently that Soapy just escaped being thrown out. To the Automobile Club, to the Park Garage,—to all places they considered in the remotest degree likely to afford information of the direction the Auto Boys had taken, the Trio went.

With furious impatience but still vainly, they hustled from one end of the city to an-

other. Repeatedly they drove past Dr. Way's residence, as if to make sure, time after time, that none of the four friends was about the green and yellow shed. All they could learn was that the chums had driven away, their car laden as if they meant to go to the Pacific Coast, at least, the preceding afternoon.

"I *thought* it was funny that only Way and Jones went to the ball game. And they did it just for a blind, too!" said Pickton grimly.

"You thought nothing of the kind!" growled Gaines. "Least if you did, it's a fine time to be telling it!"

"Well, I guess they haven't seen the last of us yet, anyway, eh?" Pick answered in that way in which he so often knuckled to Soapy's humor, leading that young gentleman on to do the thing he himself most wished to do.

"I should rather *guess* they hadn't," Gaines responded, as if the idea of pursuit were wholly his own,—“I'll show 'em a trick or two yet.”

“The first thing is to find out where they are; at least, which way they went,” put in Perth, quietly.

Gaines turned on him angrily. “What’s that got to do with it? You leave that to me!” he said.

And while it would appear that the information Fred mentioned was, under all the circumstances, quite essential and really did have quite a great deal to do with the case, that young gentleman made only a wry face in answer. Soapy did not see him. Quite possibly Perth did not intend that he should.

In fruitless running from place to place the three boys spent the day. Repeatedly were they on the verge of falling out with one another completely. Only because Pickton bore Gaines’ insolence in silence, or turned it aside by some flattering or cajoling remark, did these two get on at all in this time of trouble and disappointment,—the sort of time that really measures friendships and motives.

Perth was content to have little to say,

usually accepting the suggestions and remarks of the others without comment. He drove the car, for the most part, and as he liked it very much, earnestly hoped the proposed long trip following after the Auto Boys would not be abandoned.

Wednesday came and the Trio, glum and despondent, talked a great deal, again came very near to serious quarreling, and achieved nothing. And now the objects of their chiefest interest and the cause of their chagrin were two days upon their way. But whither?

“‘Three stones piled on top of each other to mark the place,’ ” mused Pickton over and over again. “‘They *think* they have something great in sight, but I’ll bet they don’t know exactly what, any more than we do. And they think they’re so plagued smart! We’ve just *got* to take some of the conceit out of ’em.’ ”

“‘That’s what!’ ” Soapy Gaines asserted, but rather dubiously.

“‘Might as well talk in our sleep, for all the good just talk’s doing,’ ” Perth was moved at

last to say with some asperity; and his views would appear to be not far wrong. However, he was called a pessimist, or some other word amounting to the same thing, by Pickton, while Soapy insisted quite violently, "You leave that to me."

The fact that the Auto Boys had disappeared almost as if by magic and at a time when their machine was supposed to be indefinitely laid up for repairs, Pickton and Gaines were obliged reluctantly to admit.

That their intention of following after the chums looked more and more ridiculous as the hours passed, and they had no notion whatever as to the direction they should take, was something of which they did not care to be reminded. Yet it is likely that for want of any clue whatever, and their inability to find one,—for none of the three was particularly resourceful,—the Chosen Ones would have been forced to abandon their scheme at last, but for the merest chance by which some valuable information came to them.



A sweet sizzle of frying bacon filled the pure, wholesome air of
the woods. *(Page 142)*

Early on Thursday Freddy Perth sat looking over the morning paper while Soapy and Pick were starting a fresh discussion of the necessity of taking some of the conceit out of someone, needless to mention whom. The three were on the lawn at Perth's home. The Roadster stood at the curb.

MARSHAL MIRED

SAGERSGROVE OFFICIAL PULLED OUT OF SWAMP BY
YOUTHS HE PURSUED.

The foregoing headlines came to Fred's notice as he tried to read while still following the conversation of his two friends, threadbare though their subject now assuredly was. Half mechanically at first, then with lively interest he noted the following:

"Sagersgrove, June—In a light automobile in which they had set out to overtake and arrest four youthful tourists from Lannington who passed through Sagersgrove yesterday, Mar-

shal Wellock and Eli Gouger, the latter a self-appointed detective, plunged over a bank into Cowslip marshes west of here last night. Both were buried to their necks in mire.

“The locality is practically a wilderness and the automobile would have settled beyond recovery in the swamp but for the merest accident of assistance being quickly obtained. The touring party the officers were after had encamped on a ridge of high land a half-mile beyond and responded to the cries for aid. Wellock and Gouger were able to drag themselves out of the marsh and the car of the tourists pulled their automobile out when only the seat remained above mud. Marshal Wellock was saved the necessity of arresting his rescuers for it developed that his suspicion that the youths had stolen their car was unfounded. The four strangers had themselves taken the marsh road by mistake. They were piloted to the State pike by the officers.”

Having read this interesting item through twice, the second time very slowly and thoughtfully, Freddy Perth again listened to the conversation of Pickton and Gaines. They still discussed the possible whereabouts of the Auto Boys.

"Seems likely to me that they may have gone west,—away out through Sagersgrove and beyond," observed young Mr. Perth, after a minute or two, a self-complacent twinkle in his eye.

"About as likely as a muley cow having horns, eh, Gaines?" Pick answered.

"Or a—or a dog or anybody else having 'em," Soapy responded, lamely.

"Well, of course I never did know anything about it, and of course you two *do* know all about it. Still, when you get through with all this stuff you've said over and over ever since Tuesday, till honestly I'm sick of hearing it, just read that!"—and Perth held out the newspaper, his finger indicating the important item. There was triumph unlimited in his manner.

“Aw, let’s see!” growled Pickton, doubtfully. Perth’s self-satisfied smile irritated him. He took the paper and, Soapy peering over his shoulder, both read the item through.

“Humph! May be them and it may not,” was Pick’s comment.

“Don’t be a hogshhead! It’s them all right,” Gaines answered brusquely. “Why, they’re two hundred miles away by this time!”

“Yes, sir! And they’re headed for the Gold Cup road races at Queensville,” put in Perth, quickly. “That’s just where that old State pike goes. I remember seeing the map!”

Reluctantly Pickton admitted that the tourists mentioned in the newspaper dispatch must be Phil Way’s party. Inwardly he denounced his luck that he himself had not been first to discover the news. Reluctantly, too, he admitted that the four chums were apparently headed for the Gold Cup automobile races,—a series of road contests over a twenty-six mile course, scheduled for Saturday of the following week. However,—“Don’t see,

though, what that mystery of the 'three stones piled up to mark the place,' that they seem to make so much of, has to do with races," he persisted.

"Maybe they're going to have a lunch stand at the track. Maybe they rented space for it by mail and had three stones piled up so's they'd know their place when they got there. Just like that bunch, figuring to earn some money!"

This thought, advanced by Soapy, really did that young gentleman credit, he so rarely had an idea of his own. And although Pick declared as boldly as he felt prudent, that the three stones he had heard mentioned so mysteriously had been placed one upon another long years before, which fact he had also heard stated, the former insisted that his own notion of the matter was correct.

While in no sense agreeing as to this, Pickton, for reasons of his own, carried the discussion no further. In his own mind was the thought that he, at least, would find out if the three

stones did not mark some spot vastly more important than Soapy pictured. Let Gaines and Perth think what they might, the main thing was to be starting in pursuit.

"If it's us for Sagersgrove and the old State pike west, we can't move too fast," he said. "We can trail them all right from there, and catch them by Sunday, I'll bet!"

Gaines and Perth gave prompt acquiescence. The Roadster was run to its home garage at once, and there followed the trying packing and repacking of touring equipment which inexperience always encounters.

Preparations for a hurried departure had been going forward, in a haphazard way, for a long time. The result was an accumulation of much baggage that was not needed, and the utter absence of several items both desirable and necessary. Out of such chaos order was brought before noon, however, and the three lads separated to meet again at one o'clock.

Their good-bys were said, their car at last lacked nothing which could well be carried on

a machine of its type, and the Chosen Trio headed toward Sagersgrove promptly at the hour named.

“Now burn up the road,” quoth Mr. Soapy Gaines; and Perth, at the steering wheel, answered, “We’ll see the Gold Cup races, anyhow.”

“Enough more than races, you take it from me,” said young Mr. Pickton, grimly, still thinking of—what?

CHAPTER VII

A NIGHT ADVENTURE

The cries for help which broke upon the quiet of the night, rousing the Auto Boys as they slept, they quickly answered. With what result has been told in the Sagersgrove item appearing in the Lannington morning paper, the second day following.

Briefly, the circumstances were that, his mind overheated by his large estimate of his own importance, Marshal Wellock's imagination got the better of him. True, the four young strangers had appeared to be in a great hurry. True, one does not often see, even in larger cities than Sagersgrove, four mere youths enjoying a touring car equipped for long-distance work. Also the Sagersgrove operator had plainly hinted to the marshal the telegram the

lads received looked decidedly queer. And to one unacquainted with the facts, it must be admitted, also, that such an impression was quite natural.

All in all, the bumptious officer, believing he saw a glowing opportunity to distinguish himself, enlisted one Eli Gouger in his enterprise, not so much because he desired that gentleman's assistance, as for the reason that Mr. Gouger was possessed of a motor car. He used the machine, a light runabout, in his business of ice-cream peddling, on Sunday afternoons particularly, and on various occasions when not occupied with another line of activity he pursued, namely, that of general detective.

In this connection it may as well be stated quite frankly that if Mr. Gouger had ever succeeded in detecting anything more than some small boys, whom he once caught filching cherries from his trees, the world at large had yet to learn of it. But perhaps that was the fault of people who might have employed him, but didn't. He always had said he never got half

a chance in detective work, though he liked it ever so much better than the ice-cream business.

Be this as it may, Mr. Gouger, private detective, had eagerly joined Marshal Wellock in his proposal that they pursue the four mysterious youths who, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the marshal himself declared, had stolen the automobile in which they attracted so much attention in front of the telegraph office.

In some respects the two officials were well matched. Mr. Gouger was considerably the younger, but his attire had the same appearance of needing renovating that marked the marshal's outfit. In their conclusions with regard to the absolute certainty that the young strangers were automobile thieves, and that probably a reward was offered somewhere for their arrest, the two were also quite identical. Even in their private and personal opinions of each other they did not differ greatly.

Marshal Wellock secretly considered Mr. Gouger to be nothing more than a would-be

private detective, whose gilded badge was worth about five cents as a novelty—nothing more.

Eli, on the other hand, had long since reached within his own confidence the certain conviction that the town of Sagersgrove needed nothing so much as a new marshal; that Mr. Wellock was a conceited old loafer and nothing more, and that a man of about Eli Gouger's age should be in his place.

The very fact that, in the recesses of their hearts, the two men had for each other a minus quantity in the matter of admiration, was to a degree responsible for the ignominious ending of their enterprise. Each secretly planning to reap the major portion of the glory, also the reward they persuaded themselves would follow the capture of the four desperate car thieves, they chugged painfully over the road the Auto Boys had taken. Darkness had come before they were fairly started. Now it was growing very late.

“It's sure as shootin' that they stole the car.

They never would have took such a road, except they was tryin' to sneak along where nobody would see 'em," observed Mr. Gouger.

The going grew steadily worse. It was past midnight. The little runabout had been making a slow and trying voyage over the ruts and through the holes. Perhaps Marshal Wellock was weary. He certainly had become impatient.

"Can't you get a little more speed out o' this junk wagon? Like ridin' in a stone-boat," he remarked pretty sharply, after a long silence in which he had reflected upon the probability that Mr. Gouger was "putting up some game" on him.

Nettled by these words, and being tired, cross and likewise suspicious himself, Mr. Gouger decided to shake the marshal into a better humor by going over a very rough place at the fastest rate the little car could muster. Possibly he would have succeeded; at any rate Mr. Wellock was gripping his seat with both hands to hold on, when suddenly, whizz! The

car skidded into a rut, Mr. Gouger for a moment lost control, and in another instant the little machine leaped over the low bank into a stagnant pool of thick, dirty water and almost bottomless mud.

"Now see what you done!" gasped Mr. Wellock, sputtering and spitting, as he succeeded in dragging himself up the bank. He had gone out of his seat and into the mud and water like a log rolled off a flat car.

"Who in thunder made me do it? Nobody's fault but your own! I knew 'twasn't safe, but by *gum!* you kept squealin' for more speed! Now see what *you* done," hotly returned Eli, who had also taken into his mouth rather more of the stagnant water than he seemed to relish. Head foremost he had pitched out over the steering wheel as the machine went down.

What followed when the two had taken inventory and found themselves not seriously damaged, though in a truly sorry plight, has in substance been told. Both men were still wet from head to foot and literally covered with

the thick, oozy mud when the Auto Boys reached them.

The first task was to rescue the car. This was accomplished by means of ropes hitched to the Thirty though the runabout had sunk almost out of sight. Beside the rekindled campfire on the ridge, a half-mile away, the two unhappy officers bathed as best they could and dried their clothes.

The dawn of the early summer morning was breaking now, and Billy Worth bestirred himself to prepare breakfast. The other boys began repacking the car which had been quickly unloaded, preparatory to answering the calls for help.

The identity of the lads Mr. Wellock and Mr. Gouger had learned to their entire satisfaction. Yet it was with mixed feelings of disappointment and relief that they became convinced of their folly in supposing the four young men to be thieves and runaways. For it *was* a disappointment that for all their trouble they had received nothing but a ducking in a swamp;

and it *was* something of a relief not to feel compelled to place under arrest those who had been of such timely service.

So, as they scraped the thickest of the mud from their clothing, the crestfallen officers agreed to say nothing to the boys to indicate that the lads themselves were, in fact, the suspected car thieves of whom, they had already told, they were in pursuit. Unfortunately their self-importance had caused them to let a large part of Sagersgrove know the object of their journey as they set out. Their return home, in consequence, was followed by a very different kind of story in the newspapers than they had pictured would be the case.

However, that was a matter for the marshal's and the detective's own and later consideration. For the present, and for a long time afterward, for that matter, the degree of admiration they confidentially entertained toward each other was not materially increased. Nevertheless, the two did have the manliness to bury their mutual feelings of irritation, in

the presence of the young strangers, and to offer in return for all that had been done for them to direct the boys to a cross road by which they could soon reach their proper route.

A hasty breakfast being over, the Thirty was again turned back to the scene of the run-about's accident. The little car had not been greatly damaged and from this point it slowly led the way eastward. At a still early hour a road leading off to the right and seeming to terminate in the very depths of the marshes was reached. With the assurance, however, that the rough trail was passable and led directly to the State pike, the Auto Boys ventured upon this course, Mr. Gouger's machine going on in advance as before.

A struggle of nearly two hours through ruts and holes—one so bad that the Thirty was practically unloaded before getting through—brought the promised end. Coming out of a stump-strewn lane, for the cross road was at this point nothing more, the two machines emerged upon a fine, smooth road. There was

a sigh of relief from five of the six travelers. The sixth simply shouted and the hearty enthusiasm of his "Hurrah!" was inspiring. Needless to say, the noisy one was—to use his own usual form of identification—"Mr. P. Jones, Esquire."

"It was us they were after, all right. I'm satisfied of that," was Billy Worth's comment when good-bys had been said to the two men. "They suspected something or other, and I only wish we knew what."

"I hardly believe that," Phil Way protested mildly, but Paul and Dave sided quite emphatically with Worth.

Perhaps it is immaterial, but the subject was discussed at great length. And as the Thirty again rolled smoothly forward all but Phil recalled with unconcealed satisfaction the woeeful spectacle the two men presented when first the light from the automobile lamps, carried to the scene of rescue, fell upon them.

"Why, honestly, I'm glad Dave did get us onto that awful road. We've had a real ad-

venture," chirped Jones; but he had to dodge a backhand swing from MacLester the same moment. To make his peace in that quarter he added: "Anyhow we didn't lose so much time and I wouldn't have missed the excitement for a lot."

So, as the speed and the road permitted, the talk ran on and meanwhile the car was making good progress forward. The map showed nearly two hundred miles yet to be covered and half the distance must be made to-day if possible. If the going continued good this would be no hardship, but the old pike would be left behind before night, and road conditions beyond were likely to be questionable.

Following the extremely early breakfast, the usual noonday lunch was looked forward to with no little impatience as the morning advanced. Phil had suggested that no pause be made until a small river, shown on the map to be not many miles distant, was reached, and the others agreed. Nevertheless a wagon, en route to some market with strawberries, was so much

of a temptation that the car was halted and two baskets of the fine fruit were purchased. The contents of one of these disappeared in a manner well calculated to make adherents of Fletcherism hold up their hands in amazement, had any such been near—which assuredly there were not, or not in the automobile, at least.

The second basket Billy Worth simply put away to be enjoyed with the regular noon luncheon; nor would all of Paul's and Dave's coaxing soften his stony-hearted determination. Billy, it will be remembered, was the cook and general chief of the commissary department. As such he possessed in a strong degree the trait, peculiar to those offices, of always being ready to repel too severe a raid upon the larder between meals and always keen to add some delicacy to the commissary's store.

And maybe Billy's idea was the right one. Certain it is that when the river bridge was crossed at last and the noon camp was made under some willows just beyond, nothing could

be finer than the deliciously fresh berries with sugar and cream. Phil brought the latter from a farmhouse on the hill above and a still larger supply of good, rich milk. With the fruit, bread and butter, cheese, crackers and the last of the boiled ham, the repast was ample in both quantity and enjoyment.

"Only wish we had that other quart of strawberries," sighed Paul Jones, longingly.

"Of course you do, p-i-g! Lucky to have *any!*" Billy reminded him. "Provisions are going to be a thing to look out for on this trip."

"Well spoken, my boy; well spoken!" responded Paul, with patronizing air; but Phil put in, "No joke about that. Nothing nearer the Ship woods than Gilroy and that's six or seven miles away. No telling, either, how far back in the woods we may be."

"Great Columbus, Phil! Don't talk that way! You'll give Bill nervous prostration!" exclaimed MacLester, rising and starting to look the car over. "On the job here, you fellows, if you're going with me!" he added

briskly. For Mac was driving to-day and the responsibility of covering yet another sixty miles before sun-down, and over roads some of which might be extremely bad, rested on his shoulders.

If "on the job" meant "on the car," as at least seems probable, instructions were followed with alacrity. Not even pausing to gather up the evidences of their having stopped for lunch, Billy and Paul hastily packed away bread and butter and similar supplies, then clambered into the tonneau. Phil had hurried to the river's edge where he washed dishes and milk buckets in a shorter space of time than he would ordinarily have considered proper; but the car was chugging away in waiting and he jumped up to the seat beside Dave in an exceedingly spry and nimble manner.

"Go ahead," he said, and the Thirty answered gently, smoothly to the clutch.

"You left that strawberry basket lying there by the fence and you had scribbled all over it," said Billy Worth to Paul, a half hour later.

He was thinking of the possibility of the Chosen Trio coming on behind, perhaps in hot pursuit, yet uncertain of the course. "What did you write on the box?"

"Why! Say, that's *so!*" was the answer, with a disconcerted grin, "That's right! I wrote 'P. Jones, Esq.,' for one thing, and 'With kind regards to Lannington.' I drew a picture or two and—Gee! I thought I'd toss the basket into the river! Don't s'pose it will hurt, do you, Bill?"

"Guess not. Of course we aren't billing the country as if we were a circus, exactly. At least that wasn't what we set out to do."

"Well, what d'ye think of it? I'm frank to say I'm a fine young chimpanzee," Jones muttered, really blaming himself a great deal.

"Oh, don't gnash your teeth over it! There's just about one chance in a hundred that Gaines and his crew will ever find which way we came or try now to follow us," said Billy reassuringly.

Phil and Dave agreed with Worth as the sub-

ject was discussed later, saying there was no probability whatever that Paul's writing would ever come to the Trio's notice. Even if Gaines' Roadster were to pass the identical spot, what likelihood was there that any of the party would notice or give heed to a little, empty strawberry basket?

So did Jones quickly recover his wonted joyousness. Blithely he was declaring, "Oh, I guess I'm no wizard! No, no wizard at all. No, not at all!" his customary good opinion of himself quite restored, within a few hours.

The sun was low. Camp for the night had been made beside a turbulent little brook where a woodland skirted the highway. Paul had gone to a dwelling some distance to the rear for milk. He returned bringing not only the five quart bucket nearly full, but eggs and a basket of berries, as well. Hence his self-complacency; hence for the third time, his words accompanied by that contagious grin, so peculiarly his own—"Oh, I guess I'm no wizard! Nothing like that at all!"

CHAPTER VIII

PLANS FOR THE BIG RACE

Quite likely it was because they were so completely engrossed with the intended search of the Ship woods—the main item in the plan they had discussed for many months, that the Auto Boys had thus far given the Gold Cup races little heed. Casually they had mentioned among themselves the circumstances that the western boundary of the woods was not many miles from the scene of the great stock car contests, but that was all.

Beside the campfire they kindled close to the dashing, woodland stream, however, the subject was suggested by an item in a city newspaper purchased in one of the small towns on the day's run. The final laying out of the twenty-six-mile course, it now appeared, had brought

one corner of the irregular circuit to within a few miles of the great forest. The general headquarters would be in Queensville, only a half-hour's ride beyond.

"We'll just slip over there of a morning now and then and watch the practice work," proposed Phil. He brought his open right hand down like a small pile driver upon his left wrist at the same moment, not by way of emphasis, but in deadly attack upon a mosquito.

"And go to the races? Sure!" put in Billy Worth, asking and answering the question all in one breath. "Wonder we never realized how near Queensville we'd be!"

"Yes, we'll let the race meet upset all our plans and we'll go home with nothing to show for the whole trip," muttered MacLester, with a tremendous yawn.

Jones came up with a lot of green weeds, twigs and leaves for the fire just in time to hear Dave's comment. He dropped the armful on the blaze, producing a smoky "smudge" as protection from mosquitoes, and sat himself down

cross-legged upon the ground. Then very deliberately—

“David, I really think you better go to bed,” he said. “You’re tired and cross. Go to bed, so as to wake up early in the morning and hear the birds sing,” he added soberly.

“Possibly I *am* somewhat fatigued,” was the cutting response, “and being so, you will kindly pardon me if I don’t tear any buttons off laughing at such a positively brilliant witticism.”

Paul grinned his appreciation of this thrust but before he could answer, Phil Way broke in: “Why, no! The races needn’t interfere with our plans at all. Who knows but what a day or two will end the whole expedition so far as anything the woods contains is concerned? We wouldn’t want to hike back right away! We’re after fun as much as anything, aren’t we?”

“And the most fun I can think of right this minute is to get some sleep,” Dave replied. Then with a cushion from the car for a pillow he stretched out upon his blanket. “Happy

day when we get the tent up and go into camp right, about to-morrow night," he said, as if to himself.

And if there was a note of irritation in his tone it was because he *was* very tired. Dave was a trifle gloomy and occasionally the least bit sour by disposition; but in this instance it must be remembered that he had been at the wheel of the Thirty all day; also, that the rest of all the boys had been much disturbed the night before.

"Really believe I am '*somewhat fatigued*,' myself," chirped Paul, a few minutes later, gay and lively to the very last. For scarcely had he added: "Gee! This is a *downy* couch!—Down about a foot too far!" than he dropped off sound asleep on his blanket spread over the grass.

Billy and Phil were not long in following the example of the other two and presently the only sound to break the silence was the tinkle of bells where some sheep were feeding in a pasture across the little stream.

Tired humanity finds rest and comfort even on the bare ground when more conventional beds are not obtainable. Yet Dave was right. Another night, when a permanent camp had been established, might easily show a marked improvement in the lads' situation. Not but that all four were happy and contented just as they were! Any one of them would have asserted emphatically that he was having a fine time. But—confidentially—a nice dreamy nap on the soft grass beneath some tree on a warm afternoon is one thing, and sleeping all night on the ground is another. Even the Auto Boys, in strictest confidence, mind you, would have admitted it.

Time was that, when sleeping out, whether in the open as on this occasion, or in the hill-side hut of Gleason's Ravine, the boys found themselves subject to a certain degree of nervousness. The distant shriek of a locomotive whistle on the still night air might cause any or all of them to start into partial or complete wakefulness, uncertain whether the sound was

not a human voice. The heavy barking of a dog far away, yet in the silence and the darkness seeming very close, was apt to produce a similar effect. The certain conviction that the sounds came nearer, being directed, indeed, straight toward the camp, easily impressed itself upon high-strung imaginations.

A considerable variety of experience of this character is common to most camping parties whose members have seldom slept with no roof but the sky, or none but a bit of canvas, at the most. It would not do to say they are caused by timidity. But rather they are the result of surroundings wholly unlike those to which body and mind have been accustomed.

But there are delights in sleeping out of doors which those who have never experienced them can scarcely imagine. Even though the couch be "downy" after the manner Paul Jones described, there are compensations. Of course there must be sufficient covering to keep one warm, and a roof of some kind when it rains. With these provided, soft mattresses

may well be dispensed with. The company of the stars, the good, fresh air, the music of the breeze in the branches above—these and much more will be bountiful recompense.

Every one of the Auto Boys would have endorsed these remarks and with enthusiasm, I am sure. Dave may have wished for a bed in an established camp rather than the one he had on the bare ground. They would all have voted for that. A pillow, even though made of a blanket-end spread over fresh pine twigs or clean, freshly gathered grass, beats an automobile cushion as a head-rest. This no one would deny. And if the established camp means one thing, and the roadside resting place the other, it is very well to choose the former.

The degree of comfort is the only question. The delights of out-of-doors exist as certainly one way as another. Thus, for instance, in either situation, are the stars, whether they look down in the tranquillity of a calm, still night, or through broken, storm-tossed clouds, most excellent and interesting company.

Now the whole purpose of this digression from the story is to make clear the *reason* back of the simple statement that the Auto Boys slept soundly. Notwithstanding their strange surroundings and their lack of a permanent camp's greater comforts, they passed the night in unbroken rest. If they awakened at any time it was merely to turn over and fall asleep again. If in the interim they noted, drowsily, the stars still bright, the sky still clear and the promise of fine weather to-morrow, it was merely this and nothing more. The apprehensions that at one time would have come to them that possibly danger lurked in the deeper shadows they rarely if ever experienced now.

And let no one suppose it is not something of a trial to desert one's snug resting place upon the ground in the morning, quite as much as it is to leave a soft, warm bed indoors. The temptation to indulge in just one more little snooze of five minutes, ten minutes or whatever time one thinks he might possibly allow himself, is quite the same. Complete wakeful-

ness and ambition return more quickly in the open air and buoyancy of spirit is usually greater—that is all.

With the responsibility of breakfast on his shoulders Billy Worth was the first astir. The sun was well up and all the woodland was merry with the songs of birds. Robins piped musically from the old rail fence. Bobolinks, jays, bluebirds, chattering blackbirds and even crows added their voices to the odd combinations of melody. In some not distant pasture a boy was calling loudly as he drove up the cows.

Into the cool, clear brook where the swift current eddied among some stones, Billy plunged hands and arms elbow deep. He dashed the water over his face with a half-shiver and ran to the towel left hanging over night on the steering wheel.

“You fellows going to get up?” he inquired abruptly.

“Yep! Right away!” came the response from Phil, and with a reluctant sigh he sat up

and looked about him. From Dave and Paul came no answer.

“I’m going to get a bucket of water at the creek. I’ll be back here in about a minute, and anybody who’s not up is going to get ducked! So there’s fair warning!” announced Mr. Worth. There was a note of determination in his voice.

Maybe Billy even hoped the two still stretched snugly in their blankets would fail to take him at his word. He would soon show them whether he meant what he said or not, he thought. But by the time he reached the brook Dave rose slowly and stretched himself. Seeing this, young Mr. Worth lost no time.

Half filling the small bucket, he raced back to camp. The distance was only a few yards. Two more quick steps and he would have reached the prostrate Paul; but suddenly as if shot from a gun that young gentleman leaped to his feet.

“Just saved *yourself!*” laughed Worth, making a move with the bucket as if he thought

a little cold water judiciously applied might be a good thing anyway.

“Well, you want to remember that I gathered all the stuff for the smudge last night, and I need my rest,” said Jones with a half injured air but with a sly smile, too.

“Well, that’s so! Five minutes’ work does quite exhaust some people,” Billy returned with friendly sarcasm. “If you could possibly wiggle a little firewood up this way and Phil will get the grub out while Dave puts the blankets and things away, I’ll see if we can’t have a light collation in the shape of breakfast.”

Way was already kindling the fire with the remnants of last night’s fuel supply. Paul acted upon instructions with reasonable alacrity and a fine bed of coals was ready by the time the bacon was in one frying-pan and several large potatoes, washed, peeled and sliced, were in another. Coffee and bread and butter completed the menu, and as a fine appetite is another of the delights of open air living, the call

to breakfast was answered a great deal more promptly than Chef Billy's earlier call to get up had been.

So was another day begun. So a little later was the Thirty again measuring off the hard, smooth clay of the road while the bright June sun and pleasant breezes combined to set off most delightfully every one of nature's early summer charms.

For mile upon mile the Auto Boys' route was bordered by rich pastures, waving meadows and the cultivated fields of a fine farming country. The wheat was coming into head. The oats marked the long, parallel lines of the drills like millions of tiny soldiers in green uniforms massed regiment upon regiment. Farmers, their sons and their hired men were busy with cultivators and with hoes in many a field where the young corn was starting off vigorously, as if having particularly in mind that growth expected of every good corn field, "knee high by Fourth of July," and meant to establish a new record.

Surely there's nothing to equal motoring as a means of seeing the country. Not only are the constant change of landscape and constant succession of new scenes which the railway traveler may enjoy, to be had in an automobile but more—very much more.

The motorist gains a great deal that the railroad passenger inevitably misses. For the man on the train the musical clang of the dinner bell as one passes near some farmhouse, for instance, is lost—swallowed up in the noise and rush of the locomotive. The sweet scent of the wild crab apple can never make its presence known in the skurrying currents of air sweeping constantly aside from and after the wheels of steel. And these are but samples of countless impressions upon the senses the automobile tourist experiences, which he who journeys by rail may meet only by rare chance.

The difference is vast. The Auto Boys discussed the subject with keen appreciation of their good fortune in owning a machine.

“Why!” said Billy Worth, “it amounts to the

same thing as the difference between pictures and actual life. You can lay eyes on a scene like that young fellow plowing, over yonder, say, in any art store. You can see the green of the grass and the brown of the ploughed land. See the trees and the old rail fence in the background and the team of horses and the driver. But it doesn't mean anything like as much as when you can at the same time catch that smell of the ground just turned over and hear that hired man calling out to his team. Hear him? Hear that chap yonder, now?"

And through the air, rich with the fragrance of the freshly ploughed earth came in lusty tones: "Ha-a-a-aw! Haw, there! Molly! You great big haystack, why don't you ha-a-w?"

Certainly Billy was right.

CHAPTER IX

THE CRAFTY PLAN OF MR. GOUGER

The late afternoon sun shone with a softened light in the valley through which Wolf creek flowed dark and sluggish from the Ship woods. The stream itself looked very dark, indeed, where the shadows of the trees lay on the deeper pools. Where the sunbeams struck the ripples the water had a brighter, clearer hue and tinkled sweetly, soft and low, for the current was moderate.

Looking up stream from the low wooden bridge at the public road, one could see that a sharp, irregular, wooded steep marked the limits of the valley on the east. The rise of ground began only two score yards distant from the water and with it began, also, a thick growth of mostly small trees and brush.

Rough ledges of sandstone and conglomerate rock cropped out of the earth in many places here, but the strip of land between the stream and the hillside was cleared of timber and lay quite level. Two parallel paths through the coarse grass and among the straggling bushes marked a primitive roadway midway between the slope and the creek. It extended back through the valley, apparently, to where the woods a quarter of a mile distant from the highway, stretched down from hill to hill, hiding the creek and all beyond.

As the sun was going down there rolled along the unfenced public road skirting for nearly two miles this southern boundary of the Ship woods, a heavily laden touring car.

"The bridge! The creek! That old trail through the valley—By Jinks, we're here!" cried a shrill young voice from the car. The machine had come to a halt where the rough road led back from the highway just before the bridge was reached.

"Yes, we're *here* and blessed if I see any-

thing very thrilling about it!" came another voice, in tones of decidedly less enthusiasm. "At any rate, though, we *are here*."

Is it necessary to state that Paul Jones was the first speaker and that Dave MacLester was the second?

"Well, scoot ahead, somebody! See if we can get down the bank and into that pair of ruts through the grass, yonder, without turning turtle or blowing out a tire."

This command, briskly delivered, came from Billy Worth who leaned, tired and dusty, on the steering wheel.

"All O. K! Come ahead!" shouted Phil Way a second later. "The track down the bank is here all right, but under the grass. Gently, Bill!"

With a sudden plunge and stiff jerk the car went down the incline leading from the road and across a broad, shallow ditch. Then slowly it rolled onto the grass and weed-grown trail leading up to the valley.

Way walked rapidly in advance looking out for pitfalls or possible causes of danger to tires. "Might as well get the road cleared at once, fellows," he said, and the hint was sufficient. Paul and Dave jumped down from the slowly moving machine to lend assistance.

Heavy wagons in summers that were past and the logging sleds of the timber crews in winter had broken a well-marked road. It was still rough but odd chunks of wood and the stones found here and there could be and were thrown to one side.

Paul Jones voiced with considerable earnestness the opinion that he would rather pilot the car than "heave dornicks" out of the road; but a subdued chuckle from Billy, lazily driving forward as the course was announced clear, was all the comfort his observation brought him.

"S'pose we needn't go more than thirty or forty miles back from the road!" ejaculated MacLester grimly. He was quite out of breath from the effort of up-ending a heavy pole that

had lain across the trail. Also, as has been noted earlier, he was just the least bit tired and impatient.

“No farther back than we have to go to find a snug camping place,” Phil responded with extra good humor. For cheerfulness is contagious and does a great deal more to brighten up another’s despondent mood than any sort of remonstrance against being glum could do. “Maybe that little point down by the creek is just what we want, now,” Way went on gayly. “Hold up, Bill, till we peek around here some.”

The point did offer many advantages, being a low, grassy place, like a small peninsula, where a water course curved about till it finally reached the main stream. The creek formed a considerable pool just below the junction with the water-worn trench; for, while the latter, though deep, was now nearly dry, it was apparent that in time of rain its torrents rushed into the larger stream with both force and volume.

“Rather flat and low, but pretty good at

that," observed Way, hopefully surveying the situation. "But maybe we'd better look a little further. What do you think, Mac?"

"Reckon so," said Dave, and telling Worth to wait, the two went forward to investigate.

Paul Jones meanwhile had been tracing the deep, narrow bed of the smaller stream, filled with the idea that its source must be in some spring. And presently he came running back shouting at the top of his voice—"Yelling like a wooden Indian," Billy said—"Say! oh, say! Here's the hunky-doriest place you ever dreamed about! Here's the one spot in all your natural life, for a fact!"

The rapturous enthusiasm of Jones' tones caused Worth to jump down from the car and hurry toward him. Dave and Phil, now some distance forward, also hastened back, and together the quartette climbed the rise of ground toward the woods. What they found fully accounted for Paul's delighted manner.

Here on a shelving plateau of conglomerate rock, overgrown with moss and patches of

velvety grass, was a level space several hundred feet in length and perhaps fifty feet from the abrupt descent at its front to the rough, irregular wall of natural stonework, rising as high as the tops of the trees, at the back.

From a wide but shallow cave, in the wall at the rear, there trickled a beautifully clear and cool spring. For a time the water rested in a natural basin in the rocks, then overflowed through a tiny channel of its own making. Deeper and wider this channel grew and so became the water course, previously described, leading to the creek.

Many small ash, beech and chestnut trees somehow found foothold in the earthy crevices of the rocks, but of underbrush, fallen timber or similar obstructions the place was quite clear. Being much higher than the valley before it, the little plateau caught the last rays of the sinking sun most charmingly as it also received the welcome visits of the wandering breezes that passed quite over the lower land.

Of firewood, that most necessary factor in

the making of a camp, there was plenty both below and above the broad shelf. Water of the purest quality the spring afforded in abundance. For bathing, fishing or such other accommodations as a good-sized stream could afford, the creek was but a few hundred feet away.

"Great!" exclaimed Mr. William Worth approvingly. "Simply carnivorous!"

By which expression, it will be understood, he meant that the spot under inspection was extremely satisfactory, rather than exactly what he called it.

"Never get the car up here!" declared Mac-Lester, looking about doubtfully. "Never get the car up here in the world!"

"You leave that to me," cried Paul, blusteringly, as if Mac's remark were a challenge to himself personally. "I've heard of half-backs and quarter-backs and all that sort of thing, but I'll be blamed, Dave, if you aren't the champion hold-back of the United States! We'll get the car up here like rolling off a log!"

And although Paul's expression was possibly as much overdrawn as it was picturesque, it may be stated at once that a means of running the Thirty up to the higher level was provided without great difficulty. The cutting down of a few straggling trees and clearing away of the brush where the southern edge of the wide ledge sloped off easily toward the public road, made all that remained quite safe and easy.

The net result was that, ere the shadows grew so deep as to cause a suspension of operations, the car with all its heavy load stood close beside the shallow cave and the spring. The campfire blazed cheerily a few minutes later and the sweet sizzle of frying bacon, always delicious to a hungry man, filled the pure, wholesome air of the woods.

The Auto Boys were very, very comfortable. Of this fact they assured themselves over and over again, although at no time was there room for the slightest doubt in the case. And leaving them in this pleasant situation, weary but

entirely tranquil, restful and luxuriously content, attention must at this point be returned to Mr. Soapy Gaines, and the two companions of that very unselfish and highly agreeable young gentleman.

It was on Thursday afternoon, it will be remembered, that the Chosen Trio set out from Lannington. Gaines' big and clumsy Roadster was loaded heavily. Freddy Perth at the wheel, Soapy at his side and Pickton buried among baggage strapped on and around the rumble seat, they headed toward Sagersgrove by the most direct route. Without mishap the little town of Waterloo was reached by dusk and there the night was spent. Pickton had so adroitly planned matters that Gaines registered at the village hotel for the entire party. He meant also that Soapy should have entirely to himself the pleasant task of settling the bill in the morning. But it was not to be. Very unselfishly that young gentleman ventured the supposition, when breakfast was over that, as he was furnishing the car for the trip, his com-

panions would probably be prepared to pay the traveling expenses.

"Oh, whack 'em up all around," suggested Perth. "Thought that was understood."

Pickton said nothing.

"Well, by George! I don't pay anybody's but my own!" growled Gaines. "If anybody thinks I'm soft, they better think again."

This shot was so obviously intended for Pick that he flushed hot and scarlet. "Sure! Everybody's to pay his own way!" he said. Rather sheepishly he added, though: "We might have got breakfast cheaper along the road somewhere."

And the foregoing dialogue but serves to illustrate the feeling that existed among the three companions. The unity, mutual trust and generous friendship which characterized all the relations of the Auto Boys with reference to one another were wholly missing in the Chosen Trio. The wonder is, indeed, that these three had remained together so long.

True, Soapy wanted someone for company

and someone to operate the car and to take care of it. Pickton had his own selfish end to serve by making use of Gaines in such ways as he could and Perth—Fred would have borne a great deal just for the sake of being around the Roadster.

Also, Fred liked both the other two, in a way. It was not his disposition to find fault or to be over-critical at any time. It did not so much as occur to him, for instance, that the uncomfortable rumble seat, hemmed in with baggage, should be occupied by Soapy any part of the time as the car chugged on noisily but at no mean speed, toward Sagersgrove.

It lacked still two hours of noon when Eli Gouger, self-constituted detective in Sagersgrove, beheld the heavy machine of the Chosen Trio coming down the main street of that peaceful town. He looked again and a sudden thought smote upon his brain. Then he acted.

Perhaps it should be explained that, following their uncomfortable experience in pursuit of the Auto Boys through the Cowslip marshes,

Mr. Gouger had even less admiration for Marshal Wellock than he had entertained before. And now, as he saw the strange automobile approaching, he realized that it was traveling at a considerably higher speed than the ordinances of the town permitted. Also he realized that if Marshal Wellock chanced to see the law's violation by these young strangers he would pounce upon them instantly.

In no mood was the marshal, of late particularly, to let any motorist escape if there was the slightest reason for an arrest. The officer had been made the butt of too much ridicule as a result of that chase that ended with him head first in the mud to be in a very amiable temper. He wanted only the excuse and he would clap into jail any strange automobile user who entered the town.

Well aware of all this, and well aware that he, himself, detective though he feign would be, was powerless to make an arrest, Mr. Gouger hastily planned a deep and crafty plan. He would win for himself a degree of glory which

should make Marshal Wellock appear, in contrast, a most negligent and inefficient officer, to say the least.

Frantically waving his arms, Mr. Gouger rushed into the street as the strange car and its three passengers drew near. Pickton brought the machine to a halt.

"You chaps will get arrested if ye don't watch out!" declared Mr. Gouger, vehemently, a little irritated by Gaines' instant and by no means polite inquiry, "What's hurting *you?*"

"Fact is, you've been speeding half way through town. I own a machine, myself, an' I know. Maybe there's a warrant out for ye now," he continued rapidly.

Pickton's jaw fell and Gaines felt a giving way inside as if his upper and lower halves had suddenly parted company at the waist line.

"Guess—guess—we'd better not stop to talk about it then," said Freddy Perth, brokenly, but with a sadly forced grin.

"Tell ye what, slip 'round here with me. Drive up slow. I'll get ye into my barn an' a

little later ye can slip out o' town," Mr. Gouger suggested. There was a gleam in his eye, however, and a sort of internal chuckle in his tones that would have been a warning had any of the Trio noticed them.

"Well, blame it all! Show us *where*," growled Pickton, noticeably bolder now. "Lead on!"—This with solemn, dramatic air that would have been ridiculous had it not been so tragic.

Mr. Gouger wasted time in very few more words. Through an alley he escorted the Trio, still in the car, to the yard at the rear of his own modest, frame dwelling in a side street close by. Asking the lads to leave their car partially screened from view beneath the low-branching cherry trees, he invited them into a small, tightly-boarded cowstable.

"Stay in here a spell. I'll be back," grinned the would-be detective, and suddenly stepping out he closed the door and locked it by means of a large padlock attached to a chain. "Ye can consider yourselves under arrest *right*

now,” sang out Mr. Gouger, then, in tones of triumph, “I’ll have the constable here right off an’ ye can go before the ’squire an’ pay up. Don’t be speedin’ next time till ye know there’s no *detectives* around.”

The astonishment of Messrs. Gaines, Pickton and Perth may be more easily imagined than successfully described. They did not suspect the purpose and the reason for the imposition that had been practiced upon them, nor did they realize that their captor had no authority to make an arrest himself. He had taken this means of detaining them until he could summon a constable, apparently, because he did not care to undertake the arrest alone. Having no knowledge of Mr. Gouger’s lack of admiration for Marshal Wellock, of course, the lads ascribed the motives of that very able disciple of Mr. Pinkerton entirely to a desire to share in the fine to be imposed upon them.

These general conclusions the three boys reached in an extremely short space of time. What should they do? The day was warm and

the tightly-closed stable was like an oven. In the cherry trees and along the hedge, bordered by bachelor buttons, at the opposite side of Mr. Gouger's back yard, the robins were twittering joyously. But their lively notes awakened no responsive feeling in the hearts of the imprisoned Trio.

Remotely possible is it, however, that, unnoticed though their music was, the songsters exerted an influence upon the thoughts of Soapy Gaines; or it may have been only a coincidence. At any rate, his spoken words were—

“I'll be blamed, Pick, if you ain't a bird! Followed that duffer into this trap like a pup trailing a meat wagon. Blame me, if you ain't a real *bird!*”

Mr. Gaines' tones, it may be stated, were even less complimentary than his language.

CHAPTER X

ADVENTURE BEFALLS THE CHOSEN TRIO

The stable's one window, composed of two small panes of extremely dirty glass, admitted to the young gentlemen within a dingy light. The shed was empty, save for the dirt and litter everywhere; but not one crack or crevice could be seen to suggest a loose board and possible means of escape. Clambering up to the little window, however, Freddy Perth discovered that it was hooked inside and he lost no time in admitting the air and sunlight.

"Can wriggle through here, all right, if we want to do it!" he exclaimed in loud undertones.

"Get along then, quick!" ordered Pickton. "S'pose we're going to stay here and get fined? You right after me, Soapy!"

Ordinarily Pick would have shown Gaines a very noticeable deference in allowing him to go first; but this was a different situation. He even resented Fred's being ahead of himself, and fumed irritably while that young fellow was slowly struggling through the narrow opening.

With no ledge or projection of any kind on the outer wall to steady him, Perth could only slip one foot and then the other through the window, let his body follow and drop to the ground. He struck in the midst of a wet and sticky heap of decaying weeds, garbage, tin cans, ashes and broken crockery but fortunately, upon his feet.

More frightened than ever, now, he viewed impatiently Pickton's painful efforts to force himself out of the stable by the same route, and his eventual success.

"For pity's sake, Gaines, don't be all day!" admonished Pick fretfully, when finally he had reached the ground in safety. "Let go, now!

You're all right! Hangin' on there like a crazy pinchin' bug!"

Thus pleasantly encouraged, Soapy had by this time his head and body through the aperture, and was moved, yet loath, to let go his desperate grasp upon the edges of the window's frame. Stupidly he had not advanced feet first and in consequence there was but one chance in a thousand of his being able to alight upon those extremities when he let himself down. However the urgency of the situation as well as his friend's caustic remarks determined him to make the effort and with a subdued groan he pitched forward.

It was only as might be expected, under the circumstances, that when Gaines sought to leap clear of the window and get his feet in under him, he failed—failed wretchedly. His head plunged into a large, and sadly decomposed pumpkin, carried out to the heap of refuse when Mrs. Gouger had cleaned the cellar recently. His hands grasped only the wet, de-

caying weeds and, unable to steady himself, he rolled on his back amid the cans, the ashes and all that the rank heap contained.

If there was consolation for young Mr. Gaines in the fact that the pumpkin had broken the force of his fall, he expressed it in a weird and peculiar manner, as he struggled out. If he found reason to congratulate himself that, beyond a mixture of pumpkin pulp and seeds upon his face and in his hair, and sundry sorts of decomposed vegetation clinging to his hands and arms and clothing, he was not injured, he did this, likewise, in strangely excited, irritated language.

Perhaps he was thinking of other things than either consolation or congratulations. Nevertheless he let Perth lead him quickly to the car, half-blinded with the juices of the pumpkin in his eyes. Pickton had the engine going, and Soapy was pushed and lifted into his seat with more dispatch than ceremony. Even while Fred climbed up to the rumble the automobile was put under way. Then out of

the alley and down the side street it lunged as if Eli Gouger were but a yard behind.

To follow the side streets to the city's outskirts, and avoid every thoroughfare that looked like a principal artery of the town, was Pickton's plan. For some distance he put on great speed, but later heeded Perth's suggestion to go more slowly and so attract less notice. And as even moderate driving would take one from center to circumference of Sagersgrove in no great length of time, the Roadster was well into the country within a quarter of an hour.

But on and on Pickton hurried. Whither he went he cared not, nor looked to see where he might turn to left or right. He wanted only to leave behind as far as possible the pursuers he believed would certainly be coming on.

"We'll be at the south pole sooner than the Queensville race course at this rate," Freddy Perth shouted, at last. "Head down the first likely looking road west. Great guns! Things aren't so desperate as all this!"

Soapy Gaines, still bearing noticeable evidence in his hair and on his clothing of his plunge from the window, but now able to see as usual, vehemently acquiesced in Perth's suggestion.

"Never saw a man lose his head so!" he growled, with reference to Pickton's frantic haste, regardless of direction. "We're after that Phil Way outfit, don't you know it? Catch 'em about next year! Sagersgrove is where we were going to get right behind 'em on the old pike!"

"A few miles west, then on the first thing that looks like a road, due north, and we'll come to the pike," suggested Fred, more pleasantly. "We can't help but recognize it, and the paper said Way's crowd took that route. Keep a-going. If we don't stop for noon we won't have lost much time, after all."

The still frightened travelers reached their looked-for road to the west a mile further on. Often they had looked back, but now they

paused and scrutinized carefully the distant horizon in the direction they had come.

An old black horse and buckboard and a small boy in charge of that conveyance, which they had passed a few minutes before, were the only objects in sight along the dusty, sunny road. Over in the pasture on the right, some cows were feeding. In the wood lot on the left silence reigned save for the vagrant breeze faintly rustling the leaves. From a farmyard further down the road came indistinctly the cackling of a hen in token of a new laid egg added to the world's food supply; but for aught else within view or hearing the three lads might have been the sole inhabitants of the country.

The general influence of the calm and quiet scene was beneficial to the excited minds of Mr. Gouger's erstwhile prisoners. At a far more moderate speed than they had lately traveled they now went forward again, taking the road to the west. It pitched down a remarkably long, stony hill, then crossed a broad



valley. And as by following this route the Trio escaped the necessity of taking a round-about way on the north side of Sagersgrove, as the Auto Boys had done, to pass the streets torn up for improvements, they really fared better than they thought.

Particularly was this true when, by mid-afternoon, they found themselves on the hard, level surface of the old State pike, quite as Freddy Perth had planned. What difficulties they escaped by missing the northern route the Auto Boys used, and what danger of straying into the Cowslip marshes they thus avoided, the travelers never discovered.

The fever of excitement accompanying their flight from the stable had quite subsided as Fred and Pickton exchanged places, the former taking the wheel preparatory to a long, steady run over the fine old pike. Three objects were now kept constantly in view. One, to leave Sagersgrove as far behind as possible before nightfall; another, to discover a store or restaurant where provisions for a picnic supper

might be purchased, and the third to gain, if possible, certain information as to whether the Auto Boys had passed that way. A camping place for the night was a fourth but much later consideration, for it had been decided to keep the car in motion until a late hour.

Years ago one would have found plenty of opportunities to purchase either food or lodging along the still famous old road the boys were traveling. At nearly every four corners was a tavern or some house whose hospitality might be enjoyed for a moderate price. Frequent hamlets and villages marked the way, also, and there quite elaborate entertainment might be obtained at the inns. Very different did the Trio find the situation, however—as different, almost, as the contrast between their own conveyance and the stage coaches of old.

In one small settlement after another did either Perth or Pickton leave the car to inquire for the provisions they wanted, but beyond crackers, cheese and sometimes dry, hard cakes

or cookies the general country stores offered them, they found nothing.

"We would have brought some proper stuff to eat along if you two hadn't been in such a frothy hurry!" growled Soapy Gaines, and as he spoke he was busily consuming the last of a dozen bananas Fred had brought from home.

But Mr. Gaines was not much given to self-denial or to a considerate manner at any time. He had set his heart on cold ham or chicken, iced tea and salad for his supper. The prospect of feasting on crackers and cheese did not strike him at all favorably, hungry as he was. Being pretty tired and having the mortification of his ridiculous plunge into the decayed pumpkin still in his mind, as well, it may be said that he was not the most agreeable of traveling companions.

And indeed, his mood showed little improvement as time passed. How much of his more than usual ill-temper might be attributed to the humiliating plunge from Eli Gouger's stable window, would be difficult to determine. No

doubt he thought much of it and so grew all the more irritable, instead of passing the whole matter off with a laugh and then forgetting it, as any sensible young fellow would have done.

But Gaines had not gathered in environment or training even a moderate degree of good, sound sense. Perhaps he was not alone at fault, yet right here it may be said that, clear through to the wretched and unfortunate end of his connection with the present enterprise, he maintained quite constantly an air either of bullying and grumbling or utterly selfish indolence and indifference.

Freddy Perth and Pickton, as well, for that matter, were quite willing to make a supper of such simple provisions as they could obtain at the general stores, with the possible addition of milk, and maybe a pie or fresh bread and butter from some farmhouse. But no extent of "soap," as Perth called the wheedling talk and flattery Pick administered to Gaines, would make that young gentleman agree. It was

quite dark, therefore, ere a town affording even moderately good hotel accommodations was reached. There a stop for supper was made. Even then Soapy found the iced tea and the salad not at all to his taste, but ate hugely of the plainer fare.

A more important development of the hour spent in the hotel was the certain knowledge gained that four lads in a heavily-laden touring car had stopped to purchase some newspapers a couple of days earlier. The newsstand clerk supplied this information quite frankly when asked if such tourists had been noticed passing through. He added that there would be many touring parties on the roads during the next week or more, going to the Gold Cup races.

So certain was he in his own mind, indeed, that the boys before him were bound for the big stock car contests (as he likewise had no doubt the four earlier travelers had been) that unconsciously he overstepped the truth in the report he gave. The young men who had

passed on in advance had *told* him, he said, that they were *going* to the races. He *thought* they had stated that they would stay in Queensville.

“Sure thing!” exclaimed Freddy Perth as the information gleaned was discussed while the Roadster forged steadily forward again, a little later. “Sure thing!” said he. “I didn’t think there was much to that ‘three stones piled one on top of another,’ unless just marking the place they are to have beside the race course. They’ll go straight to Queensville. If we keep going late to-night, we can be there by to-morrow night ourselves.”

Again Gaines gave it as his opinion that the Auto Boys had some business venture, as well as the races in view. Again Pickton kept to himself his thoughts on this subject—thoughts that were far from loyal to his companions. Maybe it would have been better had he mentioned them. Maybe it would have been better had he changed the plan that, in his heart, he knew he had formulated even before this journey was fairly started.

It was a warm June night. Fireflies flashed and vanished in constant succession over the field and along the roadsides. In the frequent farmhouses the lights shone pleasantly through open doors and windows. And always the gas lamps of the Roadster showed ahead a clear, smooth course. The car was leaving the miles steadily behind. Under the influence of the calm surroundings and the automobile's easy motion, Soapy fell asleep. He had turned partially upon his side and rested his head upon his arm thrown over the back of the bucket seat.

"We'll make camp when we find a good place," said Perth, at the wheel, over his shoulder to Pickton, "Gaines is dead to the world."

"Blessed good thing! He'd insist on a feather bed or something, if he wasn't," the person addressed made answer. "Don't know that I relish the idea of sleeping out very much myself; but gee whiz! I haven't got the price to hunt up hotels every time we want a meal or a bed, and neither have you. And you take it

from me, Soapy will want to borrow some money from one of us before the week is over. I'll not give him a picayune!"

"Humph!" Perth responded, and that was all he did say. He didn't fancy the change in Pickton's words and tone, now that Gaines would not hear. But later he did add:

"It's camp out or nothing for me. That is what we planned to do and if we don't find a place where we can do what cooking we have to do, I'll get a room somewhere and pick up meals as best I can. Then if I run out of money I'm going to get a job at something or another till the races come off. Might as well see them, while we're there. Our chasing Phil Way and his bunch isn't going to amount to anything anyway—nothing more than that they won't be able to say they saw the Gold Cup and we didn't."

"You stick to me, Fred. We'll make Gaines do as we all agreed. We are going to find Worth and Way and those fellows and we're going to have some fun with 'em. We can

rough it just as well as they can and if Gaines don't like it—"

"Oh, fiddle! You dream miracles and talk wonders! And it stops there," Perth exclaimed, but only half seriously. Then, "What you say is all right, Pick, but you won't stand by it."

"By the old bean porridge pot, Perth! You're the most contrary monkey I ever saw!" was Pickton's ejaculation. "I'll stand by every word I've said!"

But whether he did or whether he didn't subsequent chapters will show. For the present it is essential to state that beside a thick hedge, where the ground was level and the grass deep—and very wet with dew, in consequence—a camping place was found. Not one of the Auto Boys would have chosen such a spot. There was no water near, no trees beneath which the ground would be comparatively dry. The thorns of the hedge, also, where dead branches had fallen, might be encountered just when one least expected them.

No, Billy Worth or Phil, Paul or Dave would not have picked this place even in the dark. Pickton and Perth would not have done so either, had they possessed half the knowledge and experience the Auto Boys had gained in matters of this kind.

It was eleven o'clock by Freddy Perth's watch. For an hour or more the night air had felt quite cool, in the automobile, and thoughts of warm blankets and sleep were pleasant ones as camp was established at the point described, despite the objectionable features named.

Far back in Sagersgrove the town clock was striking the hour. Eli Gouger turned restlessly in his sleep and half awakened. "Might have had two, or maybe four dollars apiece out of 'em just as well as not, if that good-for-nothing Petersby hadn't had to get his dinner 'fore coming with me," he growled, as indeed he had been growling for some time. "Get his dinner! The blamed calf! He's a great one to be a constable, he is!"

CHAPTER XI

MR. BLACKBEARD, THE GIANT

It was with much growling and sleepy sulkiness that Soapy Gaines crawled down from his seat in the Roadster while Pickton and Fred were opening camp equipage and making ready for the night. By the lamps of the car he viewed their labors for a minute or two, drowsily grumbling the while, then putting a light motor robe over his head and shoulders threw himself on the grass heavily.

“Ow! Murder! I’m killed!” came frantic screams from young Mr. Gaines the next instant. “Ow! I’m—I’m killed dead!”

If “killed” Soapy was, however—to say nothing of his being killed “dead”—his actions were certainly extraordinary. He rolled over and over, then jumped to his feet, again calling

out in greatest distress that he was "killed," and ending with the declaration in tones both loud and angry, "Never saw such crazy idiots! Let me jump into thorns a yard long and never say 'Look out!' Somebody'll get it for this, I'll bet, now you see!"

As a matter of fact there had chanced to be a considerable heap of thorny branches from the hedge buried in the tall grass at the precise spot where Gaines had thrown himself. They found him out in several places, piercing his back and legs painfully. And although his injuries were, of course, not at all serious, he seemed somehow not to take this fact into consideration.

He hopped about—"like a crazy war dance," Fred Perth muttered—then frantically sought to examine the damage sustained by the glare of the headlights. All the while he was saying things, some of which were not exactly complimentary to those addressed, and vowing vengeance on someone or something, he apparently did not know what.

Perth could scarcely suppress a laugh but Pickton was more in a mood to express some very decided opinions as the two helped Gaines assure himself that none of the thorns were still lodged in his flesh—an assurance he seemed very reluctant to accept.

“Anyhow, it shows us we’ll have to be right careful about the tires. We’d have to pump *them* up again,” observed Perth with a grin.

But Soapy saw nothing funny in the remark and quite pointedly said as much. And it was not until Pickton had explored a spot nearer the car, on his own hands and knees, and so proved that it was wholly safe, that the sadly spoiled member of the party could be persuaded to stretch himself in a blanket there and so fall asleep.

In a little while the other two of the somewhat discordant, though self-named “Chosen” Trio had done the same.

It was Friday night—the very evening on which a certain quartette of other lads had se-

lected their permanent camp in the western edge of the Ship woods. Tom Pickton thought much of them, wondering where they were and what progress they might have made by this time with the mystery of the "three stones" as he lay gazing at the stars.

Very fearful was Thomas that ere their stopping place could be discovered and their movements investigated, he would be too late—too late to learn the secret of the Auto Boys' Quest. Or if not, indeed, too far behind them to discover the real purpose of the lads' expedition, at least too late to do some possibly successful exploring on his own account. For this, particularly, did Pick have in mind. If there was hidden treasure to be found, he had the right, he considered, to locate the same if he could do so.

But Tom fell asleep at last resolving only for the present that an early start must be made next morning and no pains spared to trace definitely the movements of the young motorists

whom he knew to be at least two days in advance of the Roadster. And this resolution he carried into prompt action.

It was just sunrise when he arose. Freddy Perth responded instantly to his call. Gaines still slept and was left undisturbed while a tiny gasoline stove was excavated from the depths of a bale of baggage and breakfast preparations started. Perth had a long walk to obtain water, but returned bringing some fresh eggs the kind farmer's wife had offered him, as well; and when Soapy was at last summoned to arise he found coffee boiling and the morning meal just ready.

A night's rest had improved the temper of the genial Mr. Gaines, temporarily, at least. Although indulging in a deal of growling over the lack of bathing facilities, which were, in fact, noticeably wanting, he "felt like a lark." At least he said so, and perhaps he did. For a creature of that description could hardly be expected to lend a hand at packing baggage away, pumping up a tire from which considerable air

had escaped, or anything of the kind; and certain it is that Soapy did not.

The day's running of the Trio was through a wealthy farming section. Often they stopped to inquire if the Auto Boys had passed that way, and, as the well-loaded touring car and its four youthful passengers had been noticed by many, they found in this well populated region no want of information. Even after the pike was left behind and a sparsely settled section encountered, it was still no task to learn at one poor dwelling or another the direction the Auto Boys had traveled and the time, even to the approximate minute, when they had passed.

The sight of an automobile was not a frequent occurrence in these parts. The way the horses shied here, in contrast with the little heed they gave the machines nearer the towns, was sufficient proof of this. The people, too, had paid vastly more attention to the touring car, as they also looked much more curiously at the Roadster here than had been the case on more prominent thoroughfares.

So did the three lads find their spirits rising. Or, it might be more accurate to say, so did two of them make such observation; for when the prospect of simply crackers, coffee and cheese for lunch developed, Mr. Soapy Gaines sank into a sullen rage which continued until evening. He was like a volcano during such periods—smoldering constantly, but emitting flame and fury at quite frequent intervals.

If any of the boys still seriously considered their flight from Gouger's stable as likely to make them trouble, they did not show it. Fully believing their captor to have been a properly authorized officer, they understood their offense in escaping him to be much more serious than the mere charge of exceeding a speed limit would be. Once Fred suggested that it would have been better to have submitted to the arrest and paid their fine, that they might have proceeded on without fear of further molestation; but to this there came from Gaines so violent an eruption, in answer, that he pursued the subject no further.

Very well did Fred know, however, that at any point along the road, at any spot, whether they might be in Queensville or at the races, at any time of night or day, the charge "fugitives from justice," might have to be faced. Perfectly well did Pickton, also, understand this to be the very unpleasant situation, though he grew boldly confident such complications would not arise as Sagersgrove fell farther and farther to the rear.

And on the whole it was extremely fortunate for the Trio that Eli Gouger was far from being a regularly constituted officer of the law. It certainly would have been an immense relief to the inner consciences of Perth and Pickton had they known this. Perhaps it was because Soapy was too positively stupid to comprehend the situation fully that, except for the ridiculous part he had played in the affair, he would have considered the escape from the barn as a particularly bright and clever piece of work.

As nearly as the three boys could learn, they were within fifty miles of Queensville when

lights began appearing in the windows of the few houses they passed, as twilight overtook them.

"Got to find beds sooner or later and why not in the first good camping place?" Pickton suggested. "Cost less here than in town, even if we reached there all right."

"Yes! See if you can't find a bloomin', thorny hedge and both of you jump into it," came from Gaines, explosively.

"And when he saw his eyes were out, with all his might and main
He jumped into the bramble bush and scratched 'em in again,' "

quoted Pickton with a laugh. For an hour he had been trying in vain to rally Soapy into a better humor. But that young gentleman making no response to this pleasant sally, Tom turned to Fred, on the rumble seat, saying: "You try to get some eggs and ham and bread, or whatever you can at the next house we come to and we'll go into camp right off. Blamed pity, though, we didn't make Queensville."

“Blamed pity we didn’t get bacon and dried beef—any old thing—at that last cross-roads store, as I wanted to,” was the answer. “I don’t relish walking into strange yards and nobody knows how many dogs ready to take your leg off, any better than you do. And after dark, too!”

Nevertheless Fred did consent to try for provisions at the next dwelling and succeeded in buying a loaf of heavy, dark bread, a chunk of salt pork and a two-quart measure of potatoes. Moreover, the man of the house, a great, swarthy, black-bearded fellow, returned with him, volunteering to show the way to a suitable camping place.

Pickton was far from favorably impressed by the looks of the man or with his deep, gruff voice. Gaines was plainly frightened. However, Fred seemed to have become quite well acquainted with the stranger at once and the two talked and walked together, as the man led the way forward.

Pickton drove up slowly, behind, and in a lit-

tle while crossed a small bridge spanning what appeared to be a nearly dry water course. But just beyond this the party was conducted over another bridge, a small affair of light timbers, erected over the wide, deep gutter at the roadside. The heavy car caused the flimsy structure to sag threateningly, and remembering the predicament following Mr. Gouger's leadership, Pick liked less and less the piloting of the black-bearded stranger.

It was now entirely dark. The car's headlights showed no road ahead—only the closely-cropped grass of a pasture with here and there clumps of brush and weeds. It was a wild enough appearing place, indeed, to have caused older men than these lads to look askance before proceeding further.

“Right ahead here, bub! It's only a shortish piece,” the stranger called.

There was nothing for it but to follow or name a reason for not doing so. Tom allowed the machine to creep forward, though Gaines whispered, “We'll be murdered and robbed,

that's what we'll be!" It was a real relief to both when Perth's voice came back through the darkness a few seconds later, "Come on up with the car. Here we are, and it's first-class."

Almost immediately the headlights shone upon an open space under some chestnut trees. It was at the foot of a steep rise of ground. Here the small stream crossing the road, just below, formed a deep, narrow pool, clear and cool. Fallen limbs and branches of a giant chestnut long since dead and now dry as tinder, lay here and there, affording the finest sort of firewood. The short, velvety grass beneath the thick foliage of the living trees was like a lawn and in all respects the conditions presented a splendid camp location.

"Ye'll want a fire the first thing," the black-bearded fellow said, and at once collected an armful of the dry wood. "Now ye can peel yer taters an' cook 'em like a ding-dang. Fry yer pork, too! Got a skillet?" said he, as the bright blaze he started flamed up.

And upon being assured that everything

needful was at hand, the stranger bade the party good-night and strode away. A minute later his heavy foot-falls upon the light wooden bridge over the ditch were heard. And although by this time the boys were inclined to believe he meant them nothing but kindness, it was a relief to have him out of sight and hearing.

Late as it was, Fred proposed a hearty supper. All were hungry and Gaines and Pickton found the suggestion quite agreeable, the latter making the reservation, however, that he'd "be blamed" if he was going to wash any dishes afterward. The remark was quite like Soapy, all through. Also, much as he sniffed and, in Fred's language, "turned up his nose" at the salt pork, he ate heartily, not to say greedily, of that fare, though the meat and potatoes were scarcely more than half cooked.

Whatever other faults he may have had, Pickton never objected to doing a fair share of work. He fell to at the dish washing while Perth opened up blankets for the night. The

campfire was very cheerful, though the gasoline stove of their outfit had been found more convenient for cooking, for all three lads lacked a broad camping experience. So more wood was brought to keep the fire blazing, and in all the odd chores performed, necessary or otherwise, the sum total of Mr. Soapy Gaines' contribution to the labor was the opening of his own suit case to find a clean shirt he wished to put on in the morning.

Although their supper and a vigorous washing of dusty, dirty hands and faces (which, quite contrary to precedent, followed rather than preceded their repast), had made each member of the Trio more optimistic than they had lately been, they still felt apprehensive concerning the swarthy giant of a fellow on whose land they were. Fred insisted that he meant only kindness, but when asked why the man should want to be more than decently civil to utter strangers, he could only answer, "Good Samaritan!"

All night long Pickton scarcely slept, so

doubtful of Mr. Blackbeard's seemingly good intentions was he. Gaines had merely said, "Well, you fellows have got to keep your eyes open. I sleep sound as a bat and would never wake up no matter what happened." Then he had growled a great deal about the quality of his bed until at last he was snoring tremendously.

Perth's confidence in the "Good Samaritan" gave him a sense of real security and he dozed off quickly. And in the meantime Mr. Blackbeard himself had returned to his homely, unpainted house and sat himself down with Mrs. Blackbeard on the kitchen doorstep.

"Likely young fellers," said he. "Might have asked 'em into the house but they'd probably rather sleep out. Beat's all where some folks get all the money, Lizzie!" His tone was one of wonder, rather than complaint. "Here's them snips of young shavers tearin' over the country havin' a good time while you,—you that's worth a hay-rack load of 'em, ain't got a fairly good go-to-meetin' gingham dress, an'

won't have till we sell the wheat that ain't hardly mor'n headed out yet. Beat's all, don't it?"

"Well, well, it's all right, John! Everybody has their good times, accordin' to their different ways an' means," the woman answered simply. "We have ours an' plenty enough to be thankful for, every day of our lives."

The whole of which goes to show that for every Eli Gouger in the world there is somewhere a true and honest, manly man bringing the general average up. Also, that big, generous hearts are often found in rough exteriors, and some of earth's truest nobility dwelling in obscure places. But—

"Gee Whiz! This is another day!" exclaimed Freddy Perth, several hours later, sitting up suddenly to find the sunlight filtering in through the chestnut branches.

And, quite remarkable as he seemed to think it, it was.

CHAPTER XII

DISCOVERED

It was Sunday morning in Camp Golden. The name had been bestowed by Paul, always fond of the high-sounding or romantic. And although David, with customary pessimism, proposed that the broad, shelving ledge be called "Camp Golden—It's-Barely-Possible" instead, Jones' suggestion was accepted; partly because no one cared, in particular; partly because his name possessed euphony, if not positive significance.

Anyway, Sunday morning it was and breakfast of coffee, corn cakes and bacon, with strawberries after, rather than before the principal part of the meal, was just over. The Auto Boys, in various attitudes of ease, made no immediate haste to clear away the dishes.

Paul Jones sat on a cushion on the ground, with legs crossed like a tailor on his bench. Billy made himself comfortable on a convenient box, both hands clasped around an up-turned knee—a favorite attitude of his,—while Phil and Dave in equally unconventional positions occupied camp stools. Their places were at opposite sides of an old-time trunk which, turned half over, served as a table. Newspapers—quickly disposed of in the fire when soiled,—no need to *wash them*—did duty as a tablecloth.

It was a cheerful, pleasant scene, there amid the shade and sunshine and green leaves. A low tent was erected with its back to the rocky cliff at the rear of the ledge. Here were accommodated two beds of hemlock twigs spread upon the ground and covered with blankets, also a box which, in addition to holding wearing apparel and the like, served as a kind of center table. Its lid was pretty well littered with an assortment of young gentlemen's belongings this morning—an odd mixture of

neckties, collars, socks, clothes-brush, shoe brush, a revolver, fishing tackle, a hatchet and a bottle of olives. Larger items of wearing apparel hung on a line along the tent's rear wall.

In the shallow cave shelves formed by building up broad, flat stones like a series of steps, accommodated sundry tinware, dishes and canned provisions. A perfect cooling system, made by diverting a part of the water from the spring to a small excavation in the gravelly floor of the cave, afforded proper storage for a crock of butter and a pitcher of milk set down in the little pool. Here, also, a bucket of other provisions of a perishable nature was similarly disposed. Not even the famous spring-houses of early days could have been more serviceable or delightful.

The campfire was placed not quite in front of the tent, as the custom is if prevailing winds do not blow the smoke in, but quite to one side. It was the width of the ledge, rather than the winds, however, which in this instance made

desirable the location chosen. It would not do for Chef Billy to have to work at the extreme edge of the declivity that broke sharply down to the valley below—the “jumping off place,” Jones called it.

The improvised table was almost directly in front of the tent, but slightly toward the right, the fire being on the left. Still further to the right was a rough shelter for the car made of poles with a tarpaulin and sundry green branches spread over them. Here were stored, likewise, a couple of axes—brought all the way from the Retreat in Gleason’s ravine—and numerous other tools, spades and a pickaxe included.

“And now we’re so comfortably settled, the pity is it’s Sunday, and—”

“And we told the folks we’d keep track of the days of the week, and they sort of took it for granted from that that we’d observe the seventh,” broke in Phil Way, finishing the sentence Billy Worth began. “Pretty good day to write some letters home, for one thing.

And those other matters you may have in mind, such as certain things that have been in the woods, all undisturbed for a good many years, will probably keep till to-morrow."

"If there had just been a text announced we'd have had a regular sermon already," quoth Paul Jones, with that inimitable grin that made his plain, freckled face delightfully attractive.

"Why, if a text is all you want, I'll give you one," spoke Way instantly. "It isn't from the Bible but is a good text, anyway. 'To thine own self be true.' It means just this: That we should not, away off here in the wilderness, and no fellow should when away by himself anywhere, be any less decent and respectable that he would be where everybody knows all that is going on. It means enough more than this, but the point for us is that it is just as much Sunday here as it is at home. We'll be civilized."

"Well, that is a sure-enough sermon and a pretty good one, too," said MacLester, quite

soberly. "We'll sing something, and it will be the same as going to church, almost."

Dave liked singing at any time, it may be remarked parenthetically, and his bass and Paul's tenor did make the vocal efforts of the quartette very pleasing. So now they sang "America," "Lead, Kindly Light," "The Old Oaken Bucket," "Onward, Christian Soldiers," and "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground." And although it must be admitted that their selections were of wide variety, they were all full of the spirit of love, thanksgiving and kindness and certainly not the slightest irreverence was intended if any there was.

"No, sir! We'll sing no more till the dishes are washed and the camp, to say nothing of ourselves, put in some kind of order," announced Billy Worth in answer to Dave's, "What else do we all know?" He began a rapid collection of the tin plates, cups and the like, but suddenly paused.

"Automobile!" cried Paul at the same instant.

All four boys rushed to an extreme point of the ledge, which commanded a partial view of the public road. Again the horn of a car sounded and they were just in time to see a heavy roadster, laden with traps and baggage and three lads of their own age as passengers, sweep over the bridge and, more slowly, up the stiff rise beyond.

"Pickton and Gaines and Perth!" cried Worth in astonishment. "And—"

"What do you know about that?" demanded Mr. Paul Jones in similar tones; and again he said, "What *do* you know about that?"—not, apparently, because he had reason to suppose that any of his friends had information pertaining especially to the Chosen Trio, or even because he expected to gain intelligence of any description. Perhaps he really looked for no answer to his inquiry. (In which case it would be difficult to say just why he made it.) At any rate he received none.

"Well, sir, I never thought they'd have the gumption to carry out their scheme of following

after us," was Phil's comment. "If they only knew how close they were just a minute ago!"

"Wouldn't make much difference," observed MacLester, dryly. "They'll locate us now, but if we keep our wits about us they won't locate anything else."

"Nothing of the kind!" Worth ejaculated. "Their hustling by so fast is good enough evidence that they think we are still on ahead somewhere. They'll never think of this woods, but likely only of the races."

"Sure thing!" put in Paul Jones, in his very positive, opinionated way. "Nothing to it but keep out of their sight. They'll go clear through to Queensville, likely. In three days more the whole county around the race course will be alive with strange automobiles. They'll never get a line on us if we keep out of sight. Simply means we've got to watch them some, though, so's to be sure *they* aren't watching *us*."

"Maybe we *had* better look into what they're doing," Phil acquiesced and all heartily agreed.

The fun of the situation, a hide-and-seek game in automobiles with the whole vicinity of the Gold Cup race course—a stretch of territory twenty-five miles in length and as many broad—as the grounds of action, appealed instantly to each one.

The best part of it, too, was that the Chosen Trio were “It”—the ones who must do the searching. The desirable side of the game, as the ones who were hunted, had fallen to the Auto Boys. Believing as they did, that their hiding place was reasonably secure against discovery, too, and there being never a rule of play to require them to call out or give any sort of clue to their whereabouts, the prospect became all the more interesting to the lads as they talked it over.

One thing of which all four boys assured one another was that they had too much at stake to incur any sort of risk of their camp being found. Also, they were agreed, there must be no underestimating of the resourcefulness and cun-

ning of the Trio. It was really surprising that the latter had succeeded so well thus far in finding the route the Thirty traversed. Their evident perseverance in doing so was, as well, ample indication of their serious intention to do all they threatened—find out the meaning of the mysterious expedition and play mischief with that undertaking generally.

All day Saturday the Auto Boys had spent in erecting their permanent camp and in establishing connections for such part of their food supply as they could best obtain from some farm. The latter had not been easily accomplished. There was little cultivated land in the immediate neighborhood of the great woods. The nearest farmhouse was a half-mile away and the next one an equal distance beyond.

Unluckily, too, it had been found necessary to go to the second of the farms in order to obtain milk. It would mean a two-mile tramp each morning, there and back. Either this or a trip in the car, and on account of the rough ground

between the camp and the public road, the latter method was hardly desirable, as a daily practice.

Aside from this inconvenience the young campers were highly pleased with their location. They had yet to make arrangements for sending and receiving mail, but this they had planned to do on Sunday afternoon. Their letters home having been written, the most convenient grocery or other source of general supplies discovered, and all the odd tasks incident to getting settled cleared away, they would be ready on Monday morning, they planned, to begin the long contemplated attack upon the secrets of the great, silent woods.

But now had come the unexpected arrival of Messrs. Gaines, Pickton and Perth much nearer these scenes than any of the four friends had supposed they ever would be. It might make an entire revision of the program necessary.

"As to that same, we shall see," said Billy Worth, looking up from the letter writing on

which, barring numerous interruptions, all were engaged.

"How d'ye spell 'barnacles'?" demanded Paul Jones, insistently, the same moment.

"Huh! Barnacles! I'll bet that's the Trio," laughed Billy.

"Lot Jones knows about barnacles," sniffed MacLester.

"That so? Listen to my letter: 'The insectivorous barnacles on the face of nature'—meaning Gaines and his bunch, of course—'them would-be cutaneous young billy goats'—meaning Gaines and the rest again—'have hurled their preposterous physiognomy unfrequented and unbid into this locality.' "

A merry laugh greeted Paul's conclusion and he grinned his own delight with himself.

"Still, I bet he don't know what a barnacle is," persisted Dave with good-natured derision.

"Why, you certain species of shell fish! What do you mean by your insolence?" demanded Jones, with mock dignity. "Barnacles—from the Latin word 'barn,' meaning a kind

of stable, and the Greek word 'culls,' meaning an inferior kind of anything. Together, then, barnacles—an inferior kind of stable, a—a pig sty, say? So there you have it; but you might have let it go without forcing me to use such a low word as 'pigs' in the presence of gentlemen, just to make myself clear in your laborious mental processes."

Phil and Billy laughed at this sally but went on with their writing. Dave must give one return shot, and it was:

"Jones, if words were water, you'd have been drowned long ago. The way you flounder around in 'em makes me think of a tumble bug climbing upstairs backwards."

Paul responded only with a solemn "Pooh! pooh!" as if he could not take time to notice seriously any such childish prattle. And while it must be admitted that there was nothing at all brilliant or elevating in the exchange of youthful repartee that had taken place, who shall say that both did not profit by it?

They had made each his thrust and parry

and, give or take, without a thought of losing temper. They had had a few seconds' practice in quick thinking, which is always desirable. The whole difference between a brain of snap and vim and one both slow and dull, is likely to lie in practice in rapid, accurate work, or the lack of such training, rather than in an original difference in capacity.

Yet it must not be supposed that even Paul and Dave were constantly in an offensive and defensive attitude toward one another. That would never have done at all. Sooner or later such a manner would have become irritating. The tongue whose words are too frequently sharp, or by constant habit, other than kind and considerate, will make trouble inevitably.

By themselves Jones and MacLester rarely indulged in such exchange as that of this morning. The fun of it was lacking when Phil and Billy were not by to serve as an audience. Alone together, the two were harmonious as could be. They were much more apt to differ at other times. An instance when they did not,

however, occurred directly after the verbal contest lately recorded.

"We will make a run to Queensville, get a light lunch there and have dinner in camp to-night," remarked Chef Billy, sealing the letter he had written. He brought his fist down with a whack upon the envelope, not for sake of emphasis but to make sure of the flap being fast.

"Aw, Bill! I'm most starved *now!*" protested Paul.

"Here, too!" MacLester urged. "Something in this air seems to make a fellow want to eat all the time."

"Well, the point is, we've got to be starting. It's nearly noon," Worth answered.

"Yes, that's so," Phil Way agreed. "Maybe we better have an egg sandwich or something like that, all around, and it will do for now."

"Sure!" chirped Jones, emphatically. "Stuff will only spoil if we don't eat it up."

"Risk anything spoiling around here," was Billy's earnest comment; but he ordered that frying-pan and eggs be brought him forthwith,

while he proceeded to rake together the remnants of the fire.

The route to Queensville was, for the first part, straight ahead upon the road bordering the Ship woods. Six miles distant, westerly, this road effected a junction with a thoroughfare running to north and south. Distant a mile or two, in the former direction, was the direct road to Queensville. This and the north and south road were both a part of the twenty-six-mile race circuit.

It was easy to locate the road to Queensville once Gilroy, with its one general store, half dozen straggling dwellings, a church, a school and blacksmith shop, was reached, for numerous automobiles were traversing the course of the races in both directions. And how the Auto Boys scanned every car! And what a collection of machines it was!—Runabouts, roadsters and nondescript contrivances, the identity of the manufacturers of which even Billy Worth could not determine. Some had been rebuilt in one way, some another and some were of strictly

home production. But among all the cars, fine and otherwise, the lumbering black and gray Roadster Mr. Soapy Gaines called his own, was not seen.

In a quiet side street of Queensville the four friends left the Thirty. They were but a few steps from the main thoroughfare upon which the business section was situated, and directly before them, as they turned into the street was a sign: "Alameda Headquarters."

"Here's one of the likely cars, now," exclaimed Phil. "Jim Wilder, cousin of our Mr. Wilder at home, drives her and he's great, they say!" He would have added: "Let's see what they're doing," but already Billy, Dave and Paul had hastened forward, bent on that very mission.

As the lads approached, the crowd about the entrance to the building surged suddenly away and, waving his hand to all to stand back, a man in overalls and jumper pulled the heavy door about and it swung shut with a bang. The

curious ones thus barred from further view of what was within—the racing car and drivers, probably—formed an assemblage so dense that those nearest the door were not visible to the Auto Boys, at the edge of the gathering. But immediately the people began dispersing. A minute later, through the thinning ranks, Paul Jones suddenly discovered the Chosen Trio.

He had just time to whisper and, with his friends, slip back of a group near the curbing when Gaines, Pickton and Perth passed at the inner side of the walk. There appeared no room to doubt the Trio would go straight forward and, when they were fairly beyond the crowd, Billy and Phil, still watching them, stepped back into the open to get a better view.

The movement was unfortunate. Freddy Perth chanced to turn and his eyes rested at once upon the lads. With a gay laugh he caught the hands of Pickton and Gaines, wheeling them around. Pointing with his thumb, his arm half outstretched:

“How do you *do-o-o?*” he called triumphantly to the crestfallen Way and Worth.

“Hello!” Phil responded with a frown, but looking about as if to see how Billy was bearing up, he was astonished to find himself alone.

CHAPTER XIII

AROUND THE GOLD CUP CIRCUIT

Phil's "hello!" was none too cordial, but glad under any circumstances to meet someone from home, and quite overjoyed to show the Auto Boys that the Chosen Trio were on the spot, Perth was hastening forward.

Again Way looked anxiously in all directions, trying vainly to learn whence his friends had so mysteriously fled. No sight or sound of them could he discover.

"Got your car running again sooner'n you expected, didn't you?" grinned Freddy, coming close up. "When did you get in?"

"Not sooner than *we* expected—sooner than *you* expected, wasn't it?" responded Phil. "Haven't been here long. You came in this morning."

"How'd you know?" Perth demanded with a searching look.

"Bird told me," Phil smiled. "Where you staying?"

"Ask the bird that, too!" grinned Freddy.

"Well, see you later. Be here for the races, I take it," Way laughed, not at all put out by Perth's adroit reply to his own question. With a little wave of the hand he walked quickly away; but a glance over his shoulder a minute later assured him that Perth, Gaines and Pickton were following not far behind. The latter two had loitered in the background while the conversation with Fred was taking place.

If Phil was astonished to find himself so unexpectedly alone, it was apparent that the Trio were scarcely less so. Perth was certain he had seen Billy Worth at the same moment he had first seen Way. What had become of Billy and where were Dave and Paul?

Phil, himself, would have given something at this particular moment to have been able to answer these questions. Meanwhile it was ob-

vious his first task was to escape from the three who followed. Where was Gaines' Roadster? If he could lead the Trio far enough from their car that they would not have that means of pursuit, it might be that Billy and the rest would come along in the Thirty, pick him up and thus enable all to make their escape quite readily.

Acting on this thought, Phil turned into the first residence street intersecting Main, the business thoroughfare. Even now he was but a few blocks distant from where the Thirty had been left. Surely, he reasoned, some one of his friends would be watching the direction he took. One of them would manage, some way, to get into communication with him, even if they did not come dashing up with the machine and effect his rescue.

Was it an instance of telepathy—the action of Billy's mind, or Paul's or Dave's or of all three, upon Phil Way's—that caused the latter to think of a sudden, rapid dash in the car, after the Trio had been led a safe distance from their own machine, as a likely means of escaping

them? Such a thing is not impossible. It is not, indeed, improbable. And yet, although stranger instances of thought transference have been fully proved, it may have been after all only a coincidence that the plan that came into Phil's mind was exactly the one Billy Worth suggested to Paul and David and which they prepared to put into execution.

Very luckily had Worth made a dive into the crowd the moment he found himself and Phil observed by Freddy Perth. Thinking Way followed, he called with a quick gasp to MacLester and Jones and darted into an open stairway. Quickly as they could the three ran up the steps into a narrow hall on the second floor.

A window was open toward the street and Worth was not long in discovering how to put it to good use. In dismay he saw, with Paul and Dave peeping out over his shoulder, that Phil had fallen fairly into the enemy's hands. He could not hear the words exchanged with Perth, but realized how mystified Way was as he waved his hand and walked away.

"Of course they'll follow. Won't let him get out of their sight!" ejaculated Billy. "We've got to make a grand rush in the machine and get Phil away from them before they know what's happened."

"Just let him lead them quite a stretch away. Gaines' car is probably right near here," Paul put in, eagerly.

The suggestion was adopted. Then Jones volunteered to keep Way and the enemy both in sight while Billy and Dave brought the Thirty up.

Ten minutes later there was a sudden blast of a flying automobile's horn in one of Queensville's quiet streets. In another instant the car had slackened speed and a young man rushed from the sidewalk and climbed aboard. Like a flash the machine sped forward again, followed by a series of angry, disappointed yells from three other youths who also dashed out from the sidewalk as if they had thought of going along.

A good many people observing the rather

mysterious performance, as they sat upon their lawns and porches, or strolled on the street, were decidedly at a loss to know what to make of it all.

"Oh, I guess we're no wizards at all! No, nothing like that! No wizards about us! Not at all!" chuckled Paul Jones in a perfect rapture of delight. "No, we're no *wizards!*"

And although Philip, William and David expressed themselves in somewhat different language, it was apparent that they, too, entertained pretty much the same opinion as the highly elated Mr. Jones with regard to their being "No wizards, at all," whatever that may signify.

Yet now that the Chosen Trio had been again outwitted and again left behind, temporarily at least, there remained the problem of keeping well beyond their sight and reach. To do this and to do it without permitting those persistent young gentlemen to bar the Thirty from entering the limits of Queensville was no small undertaking.



A minute later, through the thinning ranks, Paul Jones discovered the Chosen Trio. (Page 201)

The town was of only a few thousand population, and even now when filled with strangers and with strange automobiles from the larger cities near by, it was apparent that at any moment the four friends appeared on the principal streets they might expect to meet the very persons they most wished to avoid.

MacLester emphatically declared himself in favor of letting the Trio "go hang." If they "wanted to tag along clear to the Ship woods," he did not care. They'd have principally their trouble for their pains. All they might discover as to the object of the expedition and the camp in that out-of-the-way place, would not, according to young Mr. MacLester's way of stating it, "Make 'em wise enough to hurt 'em." Whatever the reports they carried back to Lannington, no one would give them much credence anyway, he declared.

But Phil Way sturdily opposed any such surrender. The original determination to keep the real purpose of this long journey a secret could not be abandoned now, he argued, with-

out a practical admission that Gaines and his followers had been too clever for them. Billy and Paul stood resolutely with Way. Meanwhile the Thirty had been traversing one dusty, unpaved street after another in the town's outskirts.

"They'll never be expecting to see us again to-day. Let's go back down town. If we keep our eyes open, we'll see them first, and that's all that's necessary," proposed Worth; and, being himself at the wheel, he turned the car toward the business district.

From no source came an objection. In ten minutes the machine was again standing just where it had been left before. Quite contrary to the expectations of the boys, also, they saw nothing whatever of the Trio, though they spent an hour looking about the little city and observing the hundreds of visitors.

Some had come, it appeared, simply for the day, to see the preparations for the great road races. Many were present because of a direct interest in the contests in one way or another

and would remain until all was over. Racing drivers and the builders of their cars, automobile salesmen, tire men, newspaper men from many cities—motoring enthusiasts of a score of sorts and a hundred degrees of significance, from the young fellow who expected to own a runabout some day to the engineer who designed and would drive the most popular machine in the heavy car race—they were on the streets, in the hotels, thronging everywhere.

On barns, fences, trees, posts—anything that offered a chance to drive a nail, were signs, banners and all sorts of advertising matter. One might find himself informed on one post that he must use “Heapa” oil or be miserable for life. The very next post would tell him if he did not use “Slickem” oil he’d be sorry forever. And as the really quite conflicting announcements, admonitions, claims and assertions were in great variety and multiplied many times by their frequent repetition, any gentleman who might have set out to be guided by them would surely have had a serious time

of it and have landed in a padded cell somewhere, sooner or later, undoubtedly.

In addition to the cosmopolitan character of the crowds—to say nothing of the diversity of the advertising posters and signs—were the town's decorations of flags and bunting everywhere. Then a band played on the steps of the Court House, in the heart of the little city, and the music, the chugging of engines, the confusion and excitement, the very odors—for where is the real motoring enthusiast who dislikes the smell of diffused gasoline fumes?—made a deep impression upon the Auto Boys. It is very much to be feared, indeed, that they started for Camp Golden at last much more intent upon seeing the races the following Saturday than upon delving into the secrets of the Ship woods the following morning.

By taking the longer route, followed by the race course, around to Gilroy, in going home, the four friends finished a complete circuit of the roads chosen for the stock car contest. In going to Queensville, it will be remembered,

they turned due north and later almost directly west upon reaching the course, directly in front of the Gilroy post-office. From Queensville they ran almost directly south, thence east, northeast and north to Gilroy again.

The geographical situations of Camp Golden, Gilroy and Queensville the reader should have well in mind. Let him imagine a series of country roads forming a great, irregularly-shaped dipper. The handle is the road passing the Ship woods. Where the handle joins the dipper itself, six miles west of the Auto Boys' camp, is Gilroy, a crude little country hamlet—no more. The rim of the dipper represents the roads making up the racing circuit. Nearly half way around, to the right, that is, north, thence west from Gilroy, is Queensville—twelve miles distant. Continuing on around the rim is the little town of Chester, three miles beyond Queensville.

The "Ambulance station,"—a desperately sharp curve—marks the turn of the course to the east again, two miles further on. Then

the edge of the dipper becomes very irregular as the road winds in and out through a wooded country, until at Far Creek Sawmill it strikes off due north. Four miles ahead is Gilroy again, which hamlet, by this way around, is fourteen miles from Queensville.

Much work had been done on the roads comprising the racing circuit to put them in condition, and as Phil Way remarked, on the homeward trip this Sunday afternoon, "There was certainly going to be some excitement." Yet little he guessed how much more than excitement, merely, was in store for himself and his friends.

"I'll bet there *is*," quoth Billy Worth, answering Way's remark. "It'll be some exciting, for instance, about the time we meet Gaines' Roadster somewhere around the track. That very choice Trio will be out every day, more or less, and whether we go one way or the other, it will be pure luck and nothing else if we don't come face to face with them some time before the races are over."

And Billy's view of the matter was nothing if not plausible. There was no way of reaching Queensville from the camp without following the course of the proposed races. There was no cross road leading even in the direction of that town. By a very long detour the result named might possibly be accomplished, it was true, but it would be like going from New York to Philadelphia by way of Albany and Harrisburg.

This Sunday afternoon it was most fortunate for the Auto Boys that they chose to complete the circuit the races would follow, when leaving Queensville for Camp Golden. Had they gone the other way a meeting with the Trio would have been certain, for that select company of young gentlemen spent several hours on the opposite side of the course vainly watching.

Guided only by the direction the Thirty had taken after the rescue of Phil Way, Gaines and his associates had set out in pursuit as rapidly as possible. Until dark they haunted the road

to the north and east. Their utter lack of success was quite annoying.

In fact, Mr. Soapy Gaines became so irritated that his company could scarcely be called enchanting; unless, indeed, one were possessed of the peculiarity of enjoying being called a "crazy snapping turtle" and other like names, not well chosen, at least, if intended as terms of endearment. But as to Soapy's ruffled temper and conduct generally there will be opportunity for observation later. At this moment attention should return more directly to the Auto Boys.

"If we hadn't spent a whole half-day chasing around Queensville and back again, we might have had a good walk in the woods and maybe we would have found those three stones," growled Dave MacLester, toasting his hands over the campfire, for the evening had come on quite cold.

"Never mind, little one, never mind! You'll feel better after you've had your supper. Your poor, 'ittle tummy wants something.

You'll feel better pretty soon." This language in a soft, fatherly tone from Paul Jones caused a smile. Even David smiled, too, for directly afterward Chef Billy announced the evening meal.

It was a pleasant thing to sit before the glowing fire, enjoying toasted crackers and toasted cheese after the major portion of the supper—baked beans, baked potatoes and bacon, and coffee, of course—was over. It was a pleasant thing to creep under the blankets in the tent, luxuriously tired, an hour and a half later.

Most exquisitely pleasant was it, also, to lie snug and comfortable listening to the tinkle of the little spring where the water flowed over the miniature cataract leading to the cleverly devised cooling system, and so to fall asleep at last.

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE CLARION RACING CAMP

The arrival of the Chosen Trio in Queensville did not occasion the excitement in that small city that at least Mr. Gaines had anticipated. Possibly there would have been a more noticeable interest had it not been that strangers and strange cars had already become, on account of the numbers present for the races, a drug on the market. Queensville people had grown quickly accustomed to the presence of visitors. Beyond a passing glance the lumbering Roadster and its passengers received little notice, therefore.

Soapy had counted so much upon the demonstration of lively interest the arrival of himself, his car and Pickton and Perth—whom he re-

garded as a kind of body-guard—would occasion that to attract little or none of such curious attention was a serious blow to his vanity.

The fault, Mr. Gaines in his own mind assured himself, lay in the very ordinary appearance of his friends. He would have to let it be known, he concluded, that he alone was the owner of the Roadster and that he, if not those with him, was a person of quite some consequence.

It was with difficulty that Pickton and Perth prevailed upon Gaines to do as they had originally agreed and look for quarters where they could prepare most of their own meals and so incur no considerable expense. This accomplished, they quite readily found a really desirable place of the character desired. It was a vacant, one-story, white cottage. Adjoining was a more pretentious house, the owner of both of which dwellings was desirous of taking in what money he might while the influx of strangers was on. For the moderate charge of five dollars for the week he gave the Trio the use of the cottage for themselves and permis-

sion to run their car into a shed in the rear of his own residence.

The three lads might have been very comfortable—might have fared well in all respects, in the situation presented, had Soapy been the least bit favorably disposed toward “roughing it.” With the gasoline camp stove for their cooking, ample bedding, and water and similar accommodations already in the cottage and at their disposal—why, under the same conditions the Auto Boys, or any group of really congenial young fellows, would have lived in a delightfully care-free way!

But Gaines did not like the bare floor and he did not like the absence of such little conveniences as rocking chairs and electric lights. And although Mrs. Gaston, wife of the owner of the property, and a most pleasant, motherly old lady, sent over a mirror, a lamp, a small table and three kitchen chairs for the accommodation of the boys, to say nothing of a jar of canned peaches and a fresh rhubarb pie, Soapy

“hoped he wasn’t an object of charity just yet awhile.”

Or as Mr. Freddy Perth expressed it, he “simply turned up his long, thin nose at the whole shooting match and acted like a beastly cad.” Where and how anything remotely similar to a “shooting match” came into the situation may not be exactly clear. No doubt young Mr. Perth knew just what he was talking about; but at any rate the words quoted, it should be understood, were his own.

However, and notwithstanding Mr. Gaines’ constantly expressed dissatisfaction, Pick and Fred went ahead with the plan to make the white cottage their headquarters for the week of the races. The location was pleasantly convenient. Only four blocks distant was the main street and the Crown Hotel. Here many of the racing car owners and drivers were staying and here, also, the committee in charge of the contests had its office.

Considerably disgusted with the failure again

to find the Auto Boys and out of sorts with himself and everyone else, Gaines went alone to the hotel for his supper on Sunday night. Perth and Pickton enjoyed their evening meal just as much without him, it is possible, at the cottage. And though they attempted nothing more intricate in the culinary art than boiling eggs, toasting bread and making coffee, they supplemented this fare with fruit from the stand down on the corner and so managed very well.

Soapy returned from the hotel to find the cottage uncomfortably cool and Fred and Tom both in bed—because they were tired and because they were warmer there. He sniffed contemptuously as he prepared to follow their example. Growing still more sulky, he requested both his friends to bear in mind who owned the car that brought them there. Even after he was in bed, Gaines felt moved to declare that he didn't care where the Auto Boys were or were not. He meant, he said, to enjoy the races.

He wanted to hear the hotel discussions, see

the practice work and all things incident to the contests. So far as he was concerned, he at last concluded, "Worth and that bunch might run and jump off the edge of the earth if they wanted to." Which feat, by the way, had the Auto Boys known they had Mr. Gaines' free and complete permission to perform, they would quite likely have been glad to undertake for his especial accommodation, if for no other reason.

Now, although Mr. Tom Pickton was no better pleased with the temper Gaines displayed than was Mr. Frederick Perth, the two did not themselves become the firmer friends. Being fellow sufferers from Soapy's disagreeable manner, it would have been quite natural that every bond of friendship and sympathy between them should be strengthened. Yet quite the contrary was true.

Pickton more than half believed Perth responsible for the fact that Gaines had not invited him to supper at the hotel. Fred's somewhat inferior clothing, and his general lack of

a kind of swaggering style, much affected by Soapy himself, made the latter ashamed to associate with him. In this light, at least, Pickton viewed the matter. He reasoned that Gaines went by himself because to invite one made it necessary that he invite both the others. Thinking thus, he wished fervently that Fred were some place else.

On the other hand, young Mr. Perth resented in his thoughts, if not in words and actions, a certain secretive manner Pickton had shown more and more of late. He resented still further Soapy's selfish and snobbish conduct. So all in all, harmony and good-fellowship among the Chosen Trio's members, never strong, never founded on the deep, mutual love and respect that is the basis of all true friendship, was in a fair way to disappear entirely.

Monday morning presented little change in the chilly atmosphere of the white cottage. Soapy remained in bed until Perth called him to breakfast—again toast, eggs and coffee. Meanwhile Pickton had brought the Roadster

around to the street in front, and after the morning repast suggested a trip over the course. As Gaines and Fred both liked this proposal, the feelings of all three toward one another became, for the time, more pleasant.

Earnest, serious practice by the racing drivers began this Monday morning and from four to ten o'clock the roads were closed against all others. The Trio ran down in the Roadster to the banked curve just south of Queensville to watch the work of the different cars and men. It was at this point that the main grandstand was to be. Work on the structure, rising in successive tiers of seats in rows hundreds of feet in length, was now nearly completed. No charge for admission would be made before the day of the races and from boxes for each of which, for the one big day, the price would be fifty dollars, the three lads viewed the coming and going of the machines and their crews.

A large, red car, stripped to the chassis, save for the hood, the low seats and fuel tank back of them, made the most consistent record of the

morning. Repeatedly its driver covered the circuit at fifty-five mile speed and did not exceed a minute's difference in time between one lap and another.

This machine was the *Clarion*; Kemper, driver, and Allstop, mechanician. It was a popular car and a favorite crew. Gossip at the Crown Hotel was partial to Kemper and the *Clarion* as winners in the heavy car race.

A long, low, gray car with black lines—and known as the *Hare*, was another of the “sure” winners, according to the forecast of those whose wisdom was aired each day and night wherever crowds congregated in Queensville. The identity of the *Hare's* driver was the subject of almost unceasing discussion. When out on the course or wherever he might be seen, he wore invariably a head-dress that covered his face completely. None could recognize him. On the entry list his name appeared as “I. S. Mystery”—nothing more, and it is scarcely necessary to add that a mystery he was. Cobert, his mechanician, was also unknown.

He wore no mask. His head-rigging left his face open to close scrutiny; but he was silent always. He worked with Mr. "Mystery" as if they read continuously each the thoughts of the other and had no need of any other language.

The *Harc*, as a car, was known quite well enough. The manufacturers were among the most prominent in America. As a factor in the heavy car race, the machine was considered very important, as has been stated. So much, however, depends upon the skill, experience and daring of the driver in any such contest, that many and many a man would have given a great deal to know who "Mystery" was, and where he and Cobert had acquired their apparently perfect training.

Six other cars, including the Alameda, two Brights, a Henry and two Wings completed the field for the big race. The light car contest was but a minor affair and attracted little notice. Of the six machines just mentioned, the Henry was looked upon as a bare possibility. The

Brights were not rated highly, though one of them, with Crane—a long-experienced driver—as pilot, was counted upon as an interesting “dark horse.” The Wings were the product of unknown builders. One of the wags at the Crown Hotel remarked that “the *pair* of them might fly *some*, but not very far at that.” The Alameda was not considered at all formidably, either, being practically unknown.

All the gossip concerning the different contestants he had heard about the hotel Gaines repeated as being strictly first-hand intelligence, or quite as if every word were a matter of his own personal knowledge, as the Trio watched the Monday morning practice. Very well did Fred and Pickton know where he had heard all he told them. That they secretly resented his manner of superiority there can be no doubt; but their interest in obtaining information was too lively to permit of their failing to listen, and attentively.

By ten o'clock, all the racing cars had been

taken home to their respective stations, some in Queensville and some to headquarters established in camps at convenient points adjacent to the course. With the way now open to them, the Trio started in the Roadster for a trip around the circuit, Pickton at the wheel.

"Oh, you!" called a voice from one of the tire supply pits directly in front of the grandstand.

Perth answered, "Hello!"

"How far you going?" asked the first speaker, a brisk young man in a suit of khaki. "Wonder if you'd just as soon take a couple of tubes over to the Clarion camp for me?"

"Sure, Mike," said the by no means bashful Perth, though why he supposed the name of the young man to be Michael—which, in fact, it truly was not—is a problem. But anyhow, "Sure, Mike!" he said.

"Their camp is in a little grove just the other side of Chester. You'll see a lane leading right back to their tent and a barn they have,"

the chap in the khaki suit continued. "Give 'em these two tubes. They'll know who sent 'em. You're the boys for me, all right!"

Gaines would have objected to taking the tubes aboard except for the opportunity to see the *Clarion* headquarters. He did not like the way in which Perth acted as spokesman. He so informed Fred a little later. Again he requested him, also, and with some degree of earnestness, to remember whose machine he was "banging around for the accommodation of any Tom, Dick and Harry."

Perth smoothed matters over as best he could by saying, "Oh, Gaines, let's be civilized!" but he held the two tire tubes in his own hands. When the camp of the *Clarion* was reached, he carried them personally to the man who appeared to be in charge.

With the gentleman who received the tubes Perth found it quite easy to become acquainted. He volunteered to assist as the stranger immediately set about the work of inserting one of

the new tubes in a tire. The change was being made on a car kept at the camp for general purposes. Fred's offer was accepted and he did his work right skillfully.

Gaines and Pickton looked on but gave no assistance. Later all three were allowed to watch Kemper and Allstop making some adjustments on the Clarion racer. A proud moment it was, too, when the famous driver nodded to them in a friendly way.

"Much obliged for those tubes," he said, looking toward Fred. "It was one on me that you were asked to fetch them. I intended stopping at the tire control my last time around and forgot it."

"Don't mention it," said Perth.

It was odd, but the fact, nevertheless, that this very natural conversation was the source of much irritation to Mr. Soapy Gaines.

"That Clarion car has no more chance," said he, when the Roadster was again underway upon the course—"that Clarion car has no more

chance of winning than your grandmother. The thing's a heap o' junk and Kemper couldn't drive a truck!"

"Fudge!" snorted Perth in an outburst of supreme contempt.

"Keep our eyes open and we might find Way's outfit," suggested Pickton, anxious to prevent a clash and even more anxious, if the whole truth were known, to locate the Auto Boys' camp.

Strangely enough Tom's proposal instantly interested Soapy very much. Fickle and uncertain always, he now declared that, come what might, he would find where Way and the rest were staying and what they were doing in the locality, if it took all day.

CHAPTER XV

SECRETS OF THE WOODS

“Wiggle around some! Get your blood in circulation, and you’ll be warm enough!” ejaculated Billy Worth, rather forcibly.

His remark was aimed at Paul Jones, fussing and shaking, pretending to be all in a shiver with the cold while he leaned half-dressed over the campfire. “Might wiggle a little more wood up here. Can’t afford to burn up the back-log, just getting breakfast!” Billy added.

Worth had been up and fully dressed a quarter of an hour or more. With Phil’s help he had the morning meal actively in course of preparation. It was but little later than sunrise. The air was still cool. Dave was finishing his hasty toilet in the tent and Jones half-heartedly was trying to do the same while

crouching as close to the fire as he very well could do without falling in.

"Great Scott, Bill!" protested Paul in answer to Worth's call for firewood. "Great Scott and also gee whiz! I'll bet I've toted twenty-seven cords of wood into this camp already, and we've been here just two days. I hope if ever you are married your wife will be descended from four generations of railroad firemen and your coal house will be half a mile from where you live! I just do, by ginger!"

And although Paul's words were decidedly softened by his tone of pretended personal injury and suffering, Billy called, "Gangway!" in a manner far more peremptory than sympathetic in reply. Up he came rushing with the coffee pot and, uncertain whether some of its cold contents might not be intended for his bare shoulders, Paul sprang quickly to one side. Quite sprightly then, he completed his dressing in almost less time than it takes to say it, and until breakfast was announced gathered and

carried up firewood as if he had whole trainloads to collect and only a day in which to do it.

On part of all the boys there was the liveliest activity this Monday morning. At last and at last, after all their months of planning, after all the preparations and their long journey they were ready to explore the secrets of the vast Ship woods. All talk of the automobile races, all thought of the Chosen Trio's pursuit, thus far so ridiculously fruitless, were forgotten. True, Mr. Gaines and his loving friends were in Queensville; and true, that small city lay almost twenty miles distant. Still what do twenty miles count with an automobile at one's disposal? Yet even this thought did not more than once occur to the four chums.

"Three stones piled one upon another to mark the place." Once more the Auto Boys found themselves repeating many times the words which had been the means of bringing them to the great woods. Once more they speculated upon the probability of being able, in all

this broad expanse of timbered hills and dales, to find that one small spot where years before the marker of stones had been erected.

Their search, it had been decided long ago, should be pursued systematically. To roam through and through the woods, going at random in this or that direction, would almost certainly result in a complete failure to locate the object of their trip. The danger of becoming hopelessly lost, far in the forest's interior, was still another excellent reason for keeping steadily within lines of march agreed upon before starting.

"Remember," said Billy Worth, "that the bark has the most moss on the north side of the trees. Remember—"

"Oh, fiddle, Billy! You remember that there'll be the hungriest quartette around here to-night that you ever had to cook for," broke in Paul Jones. "Nobody's going to get lost!"

"Well, you remember, young fellow, that you're to be back to camp in time to go for milk before supper," cried out Dave MacLester.

There were other parting sallies as Dave and Billy started out in one direction and Phil and Paul another. A last admonition from Way, that regardless of all else, and no matter what was or was not discovered, all four were to meet in camp again at six o'clock, marked the separation of the two searching parties. Yet even these were not the last words spoken. Dave MacLester just could not resist his customary prediction of ill-luck.

"Bet a dollar, right now, nobody finds a thing!" he called loudly. But by this time he and Worth were high up on the crest of the ridge rising above the camp. Phil and Paul were some distance away, heading straight up the valley of the stream below.

Any one chancing to observe the boys as they thus set out would surely have found his curiosity aroused by their accouterment. Each party carried an axe and spade. In the hollow of Phil Way's arm was also a small rifle. Billy Worth carried in addition to his spade a rather formidable looking revolver. Paul Jones car-

ried a noonday lunch for himself and Phil in a small box slung over his shoulder like a knapsack. Similarly MacLester bore refreshment for himself and his partner for the day.

“Pretty good fun if we *don't* find anything,” Dave found himself admitting almost before the echo of his prediction of failure had died away.

And was he right? The air was just pleasantly cool. The fragrance of the forest's tender new leaves was everywhere. No sound but the distant cawing of crows, and somewhere to the right the chirp of a squirrel broke the silence save for the rustling leaves underfoot. The very hush of the woods was eloquent with sweet sentiments. The dogwood blossoms seen at intervals, and more frequently the wake-robins and adder's tongues, contributed their touch of beauty to enhance such gentle thoughts and feeling.

Buoyant and happy, the one eager with expectation, the other less confident but very willing to find himself a poor prophet, the two lads

moved steadily, watchfully forward. Billy and Dave had been assigned to all that part of the forest lying to the north of Camp Golden and between the edge of the hillside above the creek and a long since abandoned logging road which penetrated deep into the woods a quarter of a mile to the east. It would keep them very busy to cover the ground at all thoroughly before night.

“No, this ain’t the great woods, though! Oh, I guess it’s hardly any woods at all! Very poor woods! Oh, yes! Very poor day, too!” With this and other similar declarations, equally dignified and polished, Paul Jones expressed the delighted state of his mind at about the same time Dave was mentioning his own pleasure to Worth.

Phil Way acquiesced in all of Paul’s words, paradoxical as it may appear, for he really denied them. “There never was a grander day; and isn’t it a dandy, big woods!” he said. “Just makes a man feel like soaring, though never before so conscious of his littleness and

downright insignificance. Why! the creek! these old trees! They were all here and ages old long before we were on earth! They'll be here long after we are gone, too, Paul. But oh! it is fine to be with them—to enjoy them!”

The course Way and Jones were taking was to the north through the valley. Between the east bank of the creek and the foot of the hill lay a strip of woods ranging from one hundred to three hundred yards in width. This was to be the field of their searching as they progressed to the extreme northern limits of the forest. Returning, they would traverse carefully the broad, sloping hillside, broken here and there by precipitous ledges. So would they reach camp again, and the more open valley near it.

“ ‘Three stones piled one on top of another!’ It will be along the hill, I’m thinking, that we’ll finally find them,” observed Paul thoughtfully to himself. Then, impressed by what he considered the importance of this conclusion, he called out the substance of it to Phil, for the

two were keeping some distance apart in order that the least possible bit of ground should escape their scrutiny.

“Well, don’t forget there’s something more than three stones to look for,” Way answered. “If you find anything that looks interesting, sing out. I’ll do the same.”

It was a valley of romantic interest the two boys were exploring. Here the creek foamed and bubbled into “suds” over and around obstructing rocks or driftwood. Again it rested in deep, narrow pools. Beyond, in gentle ripples the water gained speed again to go tumbling on and on in miniature falls of a thousand different shapes and sizes, where its course was rough and broken.

Years and years ago the Indian knew this valley and its adjacent wooded hills and low plateaus as a favored hunting place. Later white hunters and trappers here sought and found wild game,—the deer, the bear, the panther, the wolf, and even the beaver.

Pioneer settlers followed in their turn. For

the latter, however, the country was too broken by rocky ledges and hills. The more level and fertile lands offered greater attractions for their husbandry, so they carried their work of clearing, ploughing and planting elsewhere.

For years after the country all about had been quite opened up, wild game continued to be found in the rough region now known as the Ship woods. It continued thus to be a hunting place. Men traveled many miles to try their skill as sportsmen there, finding pigeons, wild turkeys and smaller game for a great while after the last deer and the last bear were gone.

At noon Phil and Paul came together beside a considerable waterfall of the creek. Seated on a great beech tree, partially uprooted by the undermining of the stream and now lying across it, the two ate their lunch. No reward for their searching had yet come to them. Through the screen of leaves and low bushes they could see in the distance a farmhouse. It meant that the road bounding the Ship woods on the north was very near.

“Humph! Didn’t think we *would* find anything right off,” observed Paul, philosophically. “But it wouldn’t surprise me if we’d have some luck this afternoon.” And a minute later, as if fortifying himself against disappointment,—a really wise thing for anyone to do where the element of chance is a factor—“Then again,” said he, “it wouldn’t *surprise* me if we *didn’t*.”

But although Paul had thus plainly stated that he was not to be surprised at any event, the fact remains that he gave a most joyful yell a couple of hours later, in answer to Phil’s loud signal,—“Guess we’ve found something!”

“Not the three stones, but something pretty good, though!” Way called again, easily, as Jones bounded forward. “It’s slippery elm! Twenty trees if there’s one!”

“Good enough!” Paul cried enthusiastically. “Wish it had been the other thing but anyhow we wanted slippery elm, too! We haven’t failed entirely, have we, Phil?”

Delighted as could be, Jones frisked about

like a colt while with his axe Way trimmed from a tree before him a long strip of bark. Then again and again he pulled off shreds of the inner fiber and tasted them.

"Let me see!" Paul demanded. He sank his teeth into the interior surface of a piece of the bark. It was soft and moist and had a peculiarly sweetish taste. In one's mouth it seemed to be melting away and in a smooth, oily manner like butter.

"Gee! It's slippery, all right!" ejaculated Paul, seriously, his lips screwed up like the mouth of a jug, his nose all wrinkled.

"No doubt at all about it being slippery elm," replied Phil confidently. "Only trouble is, it's not the best season for gathering it. Ought to be taken in spring when the sap is flowing. The inside of the bark is just the slipperiest thing then you ever saw."

"Twenty-six cents a pound. I remember the quotation we saw in the paper as if it were only yesterday," observed Jones delightedly. "S'pose there must be just hundreds of pounds

in the trees right around here, Phil. Won't weigh so much when it's dry though!" he added, his spirits falling slightly.

"Only the inner bark is good, but even at that," Phil returned with satisfaction, "even at that, we could gather a perfect stack of it in almost no time. Won't Billy and Dave be glad?"

Carefully noting all surroundings,—the distance from the creek, the bare knob or point on the hill yonder and various other landmarks,—that they might easily find the place again, the two boys in due time continued on. With them they carried extensive samples of their discovery and both watched eagerly for more trees of the same kind while pushing forward. But they did not forget they had other things for which to search. They cautioned each other they must be as painstaking as to this as they had been before.

How Worth and MacLester had been faring meanwhile may be told more briefly, though they were even more fortunate. That part of

the woods penetrated by them lay quite dry and high. There was less underbrush than on the lower levels. The saws and axes of the logging crews had scarcely touched this portion of the forest. All was in quite the same wild state as it had been a hundred years before.

Dave and Billy came upon a shack of brush piled over some supporting poles late in the afternoon. Some hunter had erected the shelter the preceding winter, perhaps. In any event, with its bed of leaves and abundant shade, it offered a good place to have lunch and to rest. Leaving their tools here, then, the boys descended into a valley beyond to find water. There was a small brook there but its bed was quite dry.

“Good thing we have that bottle of cold coffee,” observed Billy. “It’ll do for now. We’ll get water sometime, or—”

His sentence was never finished. Suddenly his eyes had fallen upon a low, broad-leaved plant. He gazed steadfastly for a few

seconds. Then Dave saw what it was that had so unexpectedly arrested Worth's attention and—

“Ginseng!” he exclaimed. “Sure it's ginseng! I've seen the cultivated kind!”

“I just happened to catch sight of it! Wasn't watching out for anything just then at all !” said Billy excitedly.

“And here's some more!” cried MacLester in similar tones.

“Here, too,—a lot more! Six dollars a pound for it! Hurrah for us!” And Billy ran for a spade. He wanted to make sure the plants had the forked roots usually characteristic of ginseng.

“Now, Bill Worth, don't you go to counting any chickens before they're hatched!” answered Dave. “There'll be some drawback, somewhere.”

It was quite like young Mr. MacLester to make just such a prediction.

CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER TRAVELER ON THE ROAD

“Right over the river bridge there! Just the right sort of a place for lunch. I guess somebody has stopped there before, too.”

The speaker was an attractive young chap. One would have guessed his age to be a little less than twelve years. There was a trim, neat air about him, in his dress as well as in his face and manner. The dark eyes under his visor cap were quite the brightest, merriest pair of optics it would be easy to imagine. His voice, also, was singularly sweet, though he spoke in the quick, confident way of one who thinks rapidly.

“Isn’t this just a *good* place, Daddy?” the boy spoke up again, springing blithely down from the seat of a large, two-passenger auto-

mobile when the machine had rumbled across the bridge and was brought to a halt.

The person he addressed was a man of well-to-do appearance, attired save for his cap, goggles and gloves in ordinary clothing. He gave the impression of being of that substantial type of business men who like motoring and who usually drive their own cars.

"First-rate, Son!" the father replied. "Hello! someone *has* been here before us! See, here are the wheel marks in the sand!"

"And here is where they ate their lunch!" the lad exclaimed, noticing some crumpled papers, still bearing traces of food and the stains of strawberries.

Without further comment, however, the boy hurried to help with the opening of a motor trunk on the rear of the automobile. He carried a lunch basket to the fine, soft grass under some willows at the roadside, then skipped gayly away to bring fresh water from a farmhouse on the hill beyond. The father busied himself with the opening of sardines and olives

and presently the two were gratifying appetites as keen as only a morning in the open air can give.

When their repast was over the merry youngster laughingly told his father, as he had already told him a dozen times before, that stopping thus and having dinner by the roadside reminded him, oh, so constantly, of the time when he had been with Phil Way and the other boys, on their outing last summer.

"My! Wouldn't it be fine if we should look over the river bridge and see them coming?" he asked, with the greatest of zestful happiness. "Or if going around some curve or corner we should find them just ahead of us? I guess I'd be pretty glad to see them!"

"We won't stop at any hotel to-night if they can't give us strawberries," spoke the father, now leaning back on his elbow in the pleasant shade, quietly smoking a cigar. "The other party that stopped here had some. There's the basket, blown in beside the fence yonder."

Curiously the boy crept over the trampled

grass on hands and knees till he could reach the basket with outstretched hand. Idly curious, also, he picked it up.

Of course you have guessed that this was the identical basket on which Paul Jones had written his name and "With kind regards to Lannington." Such was the fact at least.

"Oh, Daddy! oh, Father! Here's Paul's name now! And it's my own Paul Jones for under his name is Lannington, where they all live. They *have* been along this road! Don't you s'pose they *are* going to the races, Daddy?"

And now, who was this young friend of the Auto Boys who so eagerly hoped he might chance to meet them?—This slip of a lad who, by the merest accident, had discovered the possibility that Phil Way, Billy and Dave and Paul had lately passed along the same road he was traveling?

Those of you who have read "The Auto Boys' Outing" will certainly have recognized in the merry youngster "Little Mystery," otherwise Roger Comfort Falwin. You will re-

call how he attached himself to the boys, though refusing positively to reveal his identity, and how fortunate for them his connection with their outing proved ultimately to be.

To those who have not read the former story of this series it need only be stated that by his bright, winsome ways, cheerfulness and helpfulness, Roger had won the hearts of the Auto Boys quite as fully as they had captured his own. Even long before his name and home were finally discovered and he was restored to his parents, this was true.

The boys had not seen him after that time. A great many letters had been exchanged and the little fellow had even been invited to accompany the expedition the four friends planned to make in their car. The nature of the journey the boys had not made clear. But principally for other reasons Roger's mother had been unwilling to allow him to accept the invitation. It was several weeks later and nothing further had been heard from Phil and the rest, when Mr. Falwin proposed to make the

trip to Queensville in a new car he had purchased, to see the Gold Cup races. Of course he would take Roger. No other thought occurred to him, particularly as Mrs. Falwin did not care to undertake so extended a tour.

Roger's delight upon finding the basket bearing Paul Jones' name was a curious mixture of surprise and pleasure. He laughed gleefully, then again and again inquired whether it were not probable that his friends were themselves en route to Queensville for the races—whether it might not be that the very next day their car could be overtaken.

Mr. Falwin would have welcomed a meeting with the Auto Boys—welcomed the opportunity to become better acquainted with them than time had permitted the preceding summer, yet he realized the improbability of seeing them anywhere upon the road. And even if the four chums were journeying forward for the races, he was obliged to explain that it would be easy to miss finding them in the wide range of territory the race course embraced.

“We’ll inquire! We’ll ask all along the road. I’ve just got to find those friends of mine!” the boy replied with hopeful determination. “Don’t you remember my telling you about the jolly fun we had? And how Paul would call me ‘Stick-in-the-mud,’ or whatever name he happened to think of, because—and how Phil always took care of me? Why! we’ve *got* to find them if they’re at the races, Father!”

And Master Roger Comfort Falwin, it may be stated here and now, was as good as his word. Indeed, the presence of this staunch young admirer of the Auto Boys had an important bearing upon the later experiences of the lads, however much he did embarrass them for a time. For this, sad to tell, he unconsciously succeeded in doing.

Carrying but little baggage and no passengers but themselves, the Falwins, senior and junior, made rapid progress toward Queensville. Although the races would not take place until Saturday and to-day was only Monday, both father and son were eager to arrive to see

the practice of the drivers and have a share in all of interest that went on preparatory to the great stock car contests. Yet in all manner of places, from roadside farmhouses to blacksmith shops, and in hotels and garages of the small towns and villages along the route, they made frequent inquiries for the four boys.

It was not difficult at first to obtain definite news that the young tourists had passed by the preceding week. The only confusing circumstance was that two parties of boys were sometimes confused with one another. Some people had seen a touring car with four passengers, others a roadster with three.

“Don’t know who the chaps in the one machine might be,” said Roger, in his bright, quick way, “but I would know Phil and Paul and the other fellows were the four in the touring car if we were in Australia. She said,” he went on, referring to a lady of whom he had just made inquiry at a cross-roads store, “She said one of the boys was such a comical fellow, and freckled as could be, only his smile was so

broad it made them hardly noticeable! Could there ever be a better description of Paul Jones? I can just see him now, his cap way out on the northeast corner of his hair! And that quick, flashing twinkle in his eyes, always a sure sign that he was going to say something—something comical, usually! Oh, Daddy! You'll like Paul! You'll like all of them!"

So did the journey go, the miles slipping behind but leaving Roger always hopeful that at the next rise of ground or just beyond the next curve or the next woods, perhaps, the car of the Auto Boys would be sighted.

Not until the second day following did the lad lose confidence. For some time during that afternoon his inquiries were quite fruitless. A considerable number of automobiles had been seen upon the road, on account of the races drawing near, and no one seemed to remember very definitely one car from another. Then, too, the opportunities of inquiring grew few and farther and farther between. The sparsely

settled country in the section of the Ship woods had been entered now.

Oh, Roger, my boy, what happiness had been yours had you guessed that, as you crossed this small wooden bridge, beside the western border of the big woods, Phil and Paul and Billy and Dave were but a few hundred yards distant! What delight to you, and to them no less, if by some wonderful power of intuition, your father and you had turned your car down over the sloping bank and up the rough trail of the valley, coming directly upon the four friends, at this moment feasting on a mammoth strawberry short-cake of Billy's own production, in their camp on the broad ledge above!

But this measure of happiness Roger was not to know to-day. Events must run their natural course. All any mortal can do is so to try, by his own acts and influence, to shape them that only good will follow. And this Roger certainly wished always to do. If he failed—and whether he did or did not will pres-

ently be apparent—he certainly meant no harm to his friends—far, far from it.

Briefly stated, the facts are that at Gilroy Roger ran into the little store on the corner which was not only the chief mercantile emporium of the hamlet, but the post-office as well. As usual, his mission was to inquire if four boys in a red, five-passenger touring car had been noticed passing within the last few days. What he learned in answer and in the course of many questions was that the young gentlemen he sought had not only passed and re-passed the store a number of times, but on certain occasions had stopped there. And further, as a matter of fact, they received and posted their mail from no other place than this very Gilroy office.

Mr. Wimby—"J. Wimby, general merchandise, drain tile, cement. Cash paid for hides," as his name was above the door of the weather-beaten frame building—the postmaster as well as the proprietor of the store, was a sleepy, slow sort of a man—not old, but rusty, stoop-

shouldered and generally gone to seed quite in advance of his time. He did not know, he said, where the four boys were staying.

He "calc'lated" they were camping out somewhere. He "calc'lated" again, that they were not far off. And more, he "calc'lated," he "couldn't say." He did remember the names of all four lads for he had received mail for them. However, he was not able to calculate when the boys might call at Gilroy again. They had no regular time for coming for their mail, it appeared.

With quick decision as to what was best to be done, Roger bought a postal card. He addressed it to all four boys at Gilroy and gave it to the Gilroy postmaster. It was an infinitely better plan than depending upon the memory or obliging disposition of the sleepy young-old man to let his friends know that, with his father, he would be in Queensville until after the races were over; that his address until further notice would be simply Queensville, general delivery.

This much done, the Falwins turned to the right and by way of the road set apart as a portion of the race circuit arrived in Queensville at sundown. Quarters in the hotels were hardly to be obtained, the number of strangers in the little city had now become so large, but they went to the Crown Hotel for supper. Later Mr. Falwin went to inspect the accommodations afforded in some of the private residences in which rooms were offered.

Meanwhile Roger listened to the latest gossip of the races among the men who smoked and talked in the hotel office and on the street outside. He noticed a flashily-dressed youth, considerably older than himself, who appeared to be also a stranger. Several times their eyes met.

"Belong here?" asked the flashily-dressed young gentleman, approaching with an affected man-of-the-world swing of his head and shoulders.

Mr. Falwin, Jr. replied that he did not, but had arrived only that evening.

"My name is Gaines. What's yours?" asked the bold and reckless man-of-the-world, quite pompously—for Mr. Soapy Gaines and none other he was.

"My name is Falwin and I'm glad to make your acquaintance," Roger answered with dignity but all civility. The two shook hands.

"Been here all week. Deuced slow old hole but I've got a few simoleons on these races and thought I'd better be on the spot."

If Roger had said what he thought it would have been, "I'll believe as much of that as I like and that's not a great deal." But being quite too polite to say anything of the sort, he asked the question that he had already asked of the hotel clerks and several others attached to the establishment.

"I guess I *have* saw them!" quoth Soapy quite forcibly, his effort to put on airs being responsible for what he believed to be his superior language. "Would like to know myself where they're staying. Am from Lannington myself. Guess maybe you've heard of Gaines, of Lan-

nington—my governor owns half the town, more or less!”

Roger was unwilling to acknowledge the painful and deplorable fact that he had never heard of Mr. Gaines, senior, or junior either, for that matter. He avoided answering the remark by saying quickly:

“Why, then, you know Phil Way, and Paul Jones, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester! They’re the fellows I want to find!”

“Oh, I know of ’em,” sniffed Soapy in a disparaging way. “Guess my young driver is fairly well acquainted with ’em.”

By no means liking the manner of his new acquaintance, Roger would gladly have parted company with him; but eager to obtain any new clue to the whereabouts of the Auto Boys, he said: “All four of them have been receiving mail at Gilroy, at the far side of the race circuit. It must be they’re in camp near there.”

Soapy pricked up his ears. Here was intelligence that he could communicate to Tom Pick-

ton and Fred Perth as something of importance—something quite easy for him to discover, though far beyond their poor ability. He became questioner now, but Roger possessed no further information, even had he been willing to impart the same.

The younger lad was little disposed to advance the acquaintance farther than it had already progressed and was glad when Soapy said he must “be getting a fresh line on that Henry car,” and took himself away.

But unconsciously on Roger’s part, the harm had already been done. Young Mr. Gaines hastened to the white cottage. There he told Pick and Freddy how he had instantly “spotted” Falwin and by exquisitely delicate work had extracted from him the information that Phil Way’s “gang” got their mail at Gilroy. Undoubtedly they were in camp near there.

“Don’t know that it makes a lot of difference to us,” was Pickton’s cool comment. His man-

ner was really frigid. No one would have guessed that a thought he long had harbored was this instant turned to a resolute resolve. Such was the fact, notwithstanding.

CHAPTER XVII

PICKTON'S PLAN MAKES PROGRESS

The net substance of the thought Pickton had turned over in his mind, and which crystalized in form of a resolute determination, was not at all to his credit. Possibly he did not ask himself whether it was or was not. If his guilty conscience at any time sufficiently asserted itself to demand justification for his proposed course, he was little concerned thereby.

However, he did tell himself that he had been imposed upon by Gaines. He had worked and toadied for him. Soapy had returned his kindness with only continued and increased selfishness. Together they had set out to discover and, presumably, share in the rewards of the mysterious secret the Auto Boys were bent upon unraveling. Now Gaines had deserted

that project, wholly absorbed in the excitement of the races.

It was in this manner that Pickton pondered and planned. He saw no reason why he should not pursue the original program alone. If "three stones piled one upon another," marked the hiding place of treasure, why should not he obtain a share therein? Why, also, should there be any necessity for dividing with Gaines or Perth?

The original discovery of the fact that a part of the Auto Boys' secret related to a mysterious spot marked by three stones, had been entirely his own. Soapy and Fred never had appreciated the importance of this information, Pickton assured himself. Since *he* had done so, he alone would profit thereby. It might be they would never be the wiser. If they should discover that he had compelled the Auto Boys to turn over a liberal share of the hidden treasure to him, he might compromise by giving each some small part of his gains. Or, if they were disposed to be unpleasant, they might simply

“go hang,” whatever that may be. In short, it is fairly apparent that Mr. Thomas Pickton was more than slightly avaricious.

All in all, then, did it turn out that when Gaines came to the cottage with a first-rate clue to the locality in which the four chums were abiding, Pickton definitely and finally made up his mind that he would visit Gilroy and explore that neighborhood quite by himself. Herein lay the reason for the apparent indifference with which he received the news Soapy brought. And yet his own plans were such that he had no wish to break with Gaines entirely. He needed the automobile and he must do nothing to place the machine beyond his reach.

It was with his thoughts in this direction, therefore, that Pick added to his expression of coolness concerning the information Soapy had reported:—“Way and the whole kit of ’em will be around here till after the races. For my part I’ve concluded that the racing is all that brought them here.”

There was a note of deceitfulness in his rasp-

ing voice that would not have escaped a keen observer, but as Gaines was not keen and Freddy Perth was tired and disgusted with the whole subject, the real trend of Pickton's remark was not noticed.

"Anyhow we'll look around Gilroy when we can get out on the course to-morrow, eh, Pick?" Gaines persisted. He was still quite delighted with himself over the intelligence he had chanced to obtain.

"Sure! if you insist on it," was the answer. "Getting pretty exciting around town now, though. We'd miss more than we'd gain."

"Won't take long to go around the course, anyway," suggested Perth, really anxious to see what speed he could make with the Roadster, on the race circuit.

"Blamed if you two don't make me tired!" snapped Soapy with a not unusual display of ugly temper. "I'm going out again. You fellows ought to've brought some coin with you! Sticking around with no money to spend!"

"Fine! Fine!" exclaimed Freddy Perth

with supreme contempt. His voice was as an echo of Soapy's two quick steps down the steps of the porch.

"Say, I'm going to take a little run in the car. You stay near and keep your eye on things, won't you, Fred?" said Pickton five minutes later. The two had been washing their supper dishes. Gaines, by the way, had obtained his evening meal at the hotel.

"Where?" demanded Perth.

"I'm going to pick up some fresh eggs for breakfast at a country store out here," was the answer, with just an instant's hesitation.

"Humph!" was Fred's only response. If he doubted Tom's words he did not show it. Whatever he may have thought, it is certain he did not guess the real truth.

It was not yet dark. The late June evening was soft and tranquil. Pickton hurried away and Perth sat on the little porch reading interestedly in the day's paper every line printed concerning the races. Particularly did he pore over the practice record made by the *Clarion*

that morning. He had become quite well acquainted with the men in the Clarion camp. All of Tuesday afternoon he had spent with them, assisting in their temporary machine shop.

As the evening advanced and neither Pick nor Gaines returned, Fred locked the cottage door and strolled out to the main street. Watching the crowds and the passing and re-passing of the many machines going here and there, he presently found himself just in front of the Crown Hotel. He saw Soapy Gaines in conversation with a young mechanic from one of the tire camps, or controls, upon the course, and realized at once from his manner that Soapy was giving himself even more airs than usual. He was leaning upon a railing of the veranda. His back was toward Fred, who had now come quite near.

"I've got my own mechanic and my own driver here," Gaines was saying. "Neither one of them knows a lot, but they know my car, and they're good enough for young shavers.

Only trouble is, they want to be running over the race course half the time! I'm going to come down on 'em like a thousand o' brick for it. If I pay a man good wages, I want something for my money!"

Gaines' arrogance and boastful airs were intolerable. The young mechanic looked bored but Soapy continued: "Now, my driver's name is Perth. You've seen him in the car with me, I s'pose. Not much to look at, but he needs the money and I—"

"Confound your low-lived, lying tongue!" cried Fred, up the steps at one bound, and confronting Gaines so suddenly that the latter shrank back as if he had been struck.

The tire man leaped in to interpose, but was too late. Perth was already past him. As if pitching a ball with terrific force, he shot his clenched fist forward for Soapy's chin. Attempting to duck his head, Gaines received the blow squarely beneath his left eye. Down he went in a heap.

A dozen men instantly surrounded the scene

of battle. Some seized Fred as if to prevent a second attack. Others dragged Gaines to his feet.

“Needn’t hold me! Let me go! I’m not going to hit him again unless he wants to fight!” said Fred hotly, but in low tones. “Nothing to it at all. I’m sorry I struck him, but—Well, this man here can tell you what he said!”

The murmur of excited voices had subsided as Fred spoke.

“Appears that this chap has been driving for the young fellow here,” said the tire man, jerking his thumb first toward Perth then toward Gaines. “This one was just telling me—”

“Telling that I was his driver and needed the money and a whole lot of that sort of stuff!” interrupted Fred, his temper fired again. “We were supposed to be friends. Came here together, supposed to be on equal terms except that the lazy little viper did let the other two of us do all the work. If I’m going to be arrested, or anything, I just want to ask you, Mister”—this to the tire man—“to be a witness.”

Gaines kept his face buried in his handkerchief. He moaned as if he were seriously hurt.

"Speak up, you!" said one man, turning toward him, sternly. There was no response.

"Better come with me. Too much of a crowd collecting here," came a low voice over Fred's shoulder.

Perth looked up. The speaker was Allstop, mechanician for Kemper and the *Clarion*. He took Fred's arm and quietly led him away. "Where you staying?" he asked, stepping into one of the *Clarion* machines and nodding to Perth to follow.

"We're in a cottage around the corner on Quince Street; but I'm not going back there except to get my clothes. I'm through with Gaines. Pickton can drive the car. I'm through with both of them. I'll get a job somewhere."

Without ado Allstop drove to Quince Street. "This the place?" he asked, stopping at the cottage. "Get your baggage. You're going out to our headquarters. Just about the fel-

low we want till the race is over, anyhow."

Perth quickly accepted the offer.

In five minutes he had lighted the little lamp and gathered up his belongings. Pickton had not yet returned. For him Fred left the light burning and beside it a note:—

"Gaines has been telling it around that I'm his driver and you're his mechanic. I was hot and smashed him. Sorry I did it, but not on his account at all. Put some beefsteak on his eye for him. Going home by train after the races. Probably won't see you again.—F. P."

"We've been wanting someone to help with our signal system for the race," said Allstop when Perth and his suitcase were in the car. "Very elaborate system we'll have. Kemper and I will know just where we stand on every lap by seeing the signs put out opposite the Clarion camp."

Young Mr. Perth was very grateful for the timely offer of a lodging-place and employment. Just what he would have done but for his new friend's kindly assistance he could not have

told. As his ruffled feelings became calm, he regretted that his temper had been allowed to get the better of him. As well he might be, he was sorry he had made a spectacle of himself.

Telling Allstop how he felt about it, he found that pleasant, wholesome fellow disposed to criticize him only for failing to control his temper. He thought of this phase of the incident a great deal—even fell asleep in the Clarion crew's tent with the painful realization in his mind that the quick-tempered, angry word can never be taken back, nor a blow recalled.

And now if young Mr. Perth's assault upon the innocent and gentlemanly Mr. Gaines bade fair to disrupt the association known as the Chosen Trio, it is equally certain that another member thereof was at the same time working toward the same result but by another method.

Mr. Thomas Pickton's plans were making progress. At about the moment Fred's fist came in contact with Gaines' left optic, Pickton was loitering in the darkness scarcely a hundred yards from the Gilroy general store

and post-office. It was for this point that he had headed directly when, alone in the Roadster, he was well clear of Quince Street and the white cottage.

There were many cars on the roads of the racing circuit as Pick had driven forth. He found it necessary to keep his wits constantly alert. In both directions machines went speeding along in the semi-darkness. He watched each one he met, and each that overtook him, thinking to discover, going one way or another, the Auto Boys. But he drew close to Gilroy with no such result.

In front of the post-office and store a couple of automobiles had stopped. The light of a gasoline torch illumined them. One was a partially stripped touring car. The other was a five-passenger machine which he recognized instantly. Phil Way and his friends, it was very certain, could not be far distant.

Pickton stopped at once, then backed the Roadster to the protecting shadows of a barn standing close to the highway. He eagerly as-

sured his fast-beating heart that at least he would see in what direction the four chums had their camp, if nothing more. His hawk-like eyes fairly gleaming in the dim moonlight, he waited.

"Now for home and bed and I, for one, am plenty ready!"

The voice was Billy Worth's. He came out of the store carrying several packages. Way, MacLester and Jones were with him.

Other words were spoken but were not audible to the spy lurking beside the old barn. An automobile whizzed past over the race course but the four friends gave it no heed. The whole countryside was by this time quite alive with strange machines. The honk-honk of their horns could be heard at almost any hour, by day or by night. The fact was in Pickton's favor. With so many cars coming and going he was little likely to be particularly noticed by any one.

Tom saw the chums climb leisurely into their machine and at fair speed drive away. Noticing

carefully the road they took, he turned out the lights of the Roadster and followed. "No need to go very near," he told himself, "just so I keep their tail lamp in sight!" Nor did he have the least difficulty in escaping discovery.

Lurking in the distance, he could see the lights of the car ahead plainly. With the Roadster's lamps turned out, it would have been almost impossible for the Auto Boys to see him, for though the pale moon gave sufficient light for driving, objects were not distinguishable for more than a few rods.

It surprised and perplexed Pickton to find himself being led so far from the race circuit. Excepting for the words he had overheard, "Now for home and bed," he would surely have concluded the Auto Boys were not driving to their camp.

Then suddenly the red tail light disappeared from view. For a little time Tom was more than ever puzzled; but only for an interval. From the top of the rise of ground sloping down to the creek near the Ship woods he saw

the Thirty's lamps again, and realized that the car had turned off from the main road.

Very guardedly Pickton followed on. When he saw that only a rough trail led down into the valley from the highway he rightly guessed that the Auto Boys had little further to go. He left the Roadster under the low branches of some scrub-oaks, just beyond the trail's junction with the road. Stealthily, then, he took his way on foot across the valley. At first the Thirty's lights were his guide. A little later the glow of a re-kindled campfire was seen.

Unsuspicious, never dreaming that they were watched, the Auto Boys fell very, very easy victims to Mr. Pickton's eavesdropping. He, on the other hand, was doing no more than he had done many a time before back of the little green and yellow garage in Lannington.

Not a great deal did Pickton discover or hear to reward him for his trouble, yet for his purpose he considered it enough. He was satisfied from the bits of conversation reaching his ears that the four friends had made some

search for the "three stones which marked the place," but thus far had been unsuccessful. Also, that the spot they wished to find was located somewhere in this portion of the Ship woods.

The lights went out at last and save for the dull glow of the campfire's coals, the place was dark and silent. Like a sneak-thief Pickton left his hiding place among the low trees at the border of the broad ledge and stole back to the public road. Not until he neared Gilroy did he relight the lamps of the Roadster, then at the best speed possible he hastened on to Queensville. It was not yet late when he put the car up and went into the cottage. No one was there.

"Never so much as missed me," thought Tom with self-satisfaction. Then his eye fell upon Fred Perth's note. "The deuce!" he exclaimed with an astonished frown, reading the missive. But his expression changed abruptly. "Humph! Suits me!" he soliloquized. "With

Perth out of the way, Soapy will be easy. Blamed little beast! So I'm his *mechanic!*''

As has been stated heretofore, there was habitually something peculiarly harsh and rasping in Pickton's voice and manner.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MERRY REUNION

It was a pleased and merry group of young explorers who sat at supper in Camp Golden. It was nightfall of that day of discoveries when Phil and Paul had found one thing and Dave and Billy another. Quite too tired were they to be very demonstrative in their merriment, but they were glad, indeed, to feel that the success of their long-cherished plans and their tour was assured.

There would be no smiles of derision to be faced when they returned home and inquiry was made concerning the result of the much-talked-of expedition. There would be no chance for Mr. and Mrs. Jealousy, or any of that family, to tell each other, "I told you so"; no chance

for them or anyone to gloat in secret over fruitless labor and expense as the only outcome of the mysterious undertaking.

Even Dave MacLester, weary as he certainly was, showed himself in lively spirits. It was quite unusual for him, when tired out, to obtain the same amusement as any of the rest from Paul's attempts at humor—"near jokes," Billy called them.

But until he quite painfully choked, as, when drinking his coffee, he burst into a laugh at the same time, not once did he score Jones for his witticisms, as was customary with him. And all he said then was, "The trouble with low comedy is that some unoffending bystander is the victim. If the cheap comedian would only choke to death, it would seem more like justice and good business generally."

Paul's reply was a great pretense of injured feelings and in a tone of complete resignation, "I'd do anything, dear, in this world for you," he half-spoke, half-sang the words. Then

more briskly: "But oh, sa'ssage! We'd find those three stones if we could just half see, if we knew where to look!"

"Humph! finding ginseng and a lot of it is the main thing," put in Billy Worth. "And I've a proposal to make. We know now that we can make this trip pay. We'll have plenty of time that we can give to the woods later. Let's see the practice on the race course to-morrow. We'll stay home the next day, which will be Wednesday. We'll give Thursday to the races again, be in camp and the woods Friday and get away in good time to see the night-before crowds and be at the course ourselves to see the race actually start at daylight Saturday morning."

The trend of all comment upon this suggestion was that of assent. The boys were enthusiastic motorists. The opportunity to see a great road race had never been theirs before. Their trip over the course had heightened their interest and they had themselves talked so much of the "Man of Mystery," of Kemper

and other drivers, and of the prospects of different cars, reading with avidity all the newspaper reports they could obtain—why the veriest novice of a prophet could easily have foretold what their ultimate decision as to Billy's proposal would be!

Thus it was that on Tuesday, while the roads of the circuit were practically closed except to drivers engaged in practice, the Auto Boys watched the racing machines roar by near the Gilroy post-office corner. It was a fine sight.

“Car coming!”—whichever one happened to be perched upon the highest post would cry, and instantly all conversation ceased.

Looking like some great bug in the far distance of the brown road, a racer would come into view over the crest of the ridge a mile away, then for a very few seconds disappear in the valley. The lessened distance made the speed seem much increased when next the machine was sighted. How swiftly it came forward! Leaping quite entirely off the ground, apparently, and with a terrific rush and roar,

the car seemed literally to tear its way through the air like some unbridled force, even resenting the atmosphere's resistance!

All in a flash the car drew near, passed and was gone—again only a great bug against the brown of the road, until out of sight beyond a curve.

Doubly interesting and exciting was it when two cars came on and thundered by in quick succession. And no matter which the racing car, no matter who the driver, the Auto Boys cheered and cheered again, each time any one of them went rushing by.

“Go!” was the favorite cry.

“Go!” Paul Jones would fairly scream, holding his hands as a trumpet.

“Go!” Way and MacLester shouted. One might have supposed the racing drivers would be quite irritated.

They *were* going. No doubt they thought they were going fast. Surely each was putting forth his best efforts as, with eyes on a level with the steering wheel and head bent forward,

he fixed his gaze onward, nor looked ever to right or left. And then to be told, "Go!" Then to be instructed, ordered, requested and implored to "go!" Surely they would have been justified in resenting it.

And yet they didn't. Quite the contrary, one of them waved a hand to the four enthusiastic friends, on one occasion, as he went whizzing furiously past. Which friendly signal seemed not to satisfy Paul Jones, however, for his exact words were:

"Well, I guess he isn't going at all! Not at all! He isn't going *some!*" But maybe Paul didn't mean precisely what he said. Surely the driver thought he was doing well.

At ten o'clock the roads of the race circuit were open to all again. The Auto Boys ran to Queensville. Keeping eyes open constantly for the Chosen Trio, they left their machine in a secluded place and went to a restaurant for lunch. Some supplies for the camp were purchased—though Billy Worth protested he never could do marketing with any satisfaction di-

rectly after a hearty meal—then the Thirty was headed once more to the race circuit.

The roads had been freshly oiled on Monday and were in fine condition. The June day was ideal. Nothing more delightful than the swift ride on around toward Gilroy, by way of the South road, past Chester and the “Ambulance station” curve, could be imagined. But misfortune comes when one least looks for it.

On the far side of the course, a little way from Far Creek Sawmill, the lads found their machine suddenly stalled. The trouble was in the carburetor, they easily discovered, but they could not so quickly remedy the difficulty.

“Dirty gasoline! I told you so!” growled MacLester. And inasmuch as it appeared he was correct, no one contradicted. And when, a little later, Billy demonstrated the truth of the assertion that a clogging of pipes caused the trouble, Dave was very much pleased with himself. Still his self-satisfaction was of short duration.

“Appears to be some fibre or threads from

that rag Mac dropped in the gasoline tank when he washed the car that time," announced Billy, when he had drawn the obstruction out at last.

"Let me see!" demanded Dave; but he could not save himself from a laugh, for the evidence was indisputable.

"Usually does work out that the fellow who hollers loudest has the least cause for it," chirped Paul Jones, gleefully. And while his observation very generally holds good, it was not the soundness of his philosophy that pleased Paul. For, be it known, Dave's remark about dirty gasoline was a shot at young Mr. Jones, which individual had but this very day deplored the necessity of gasoline being strained.

In good season the four friends reached camp. A trial for fish, which ended with poor success, was followed by a swim in one of the deeper pools of the creek. Supper and bed came in due season as did also another day—as days will. And although the stock car races had for

the time become the most popular subject of discussion, the prospect of making further search of the woods was pleasant to contemplate as the noisy crows awoke the lads with the coming of this new morning.

The vicinity in which Dave and Billy had found the wild ginseng was more fully explored to-day. The four boys went together. Not in great abundance, yet in quantities which would make the gathering thereof quite profitable, was the plant discovered along the slopes of a low ridge.

"Six dollars a pound for the dried root," figured Paul Jones, for at least the twentieth time. "Suppose we get fifty pounds of green roots. That will make about twenty-five pounds dried—hundred and fifty dollars! Gee! What if we could get a *thousand* pounds!"

But although, each in his own way, the others shared Paul's enthusiasm, all of the boys were far too sensible to look for more than a moderate return for such quantities of these roots,

highly valued by the Chinese, as they would probably find. The slippery elm, another article of some consequence in the drug trade, would also yield, they believed, some profit for their trouble. They did not expect, in other words, to obtain riches or even very large sums from their venture, but enough to make the work interesting.

The search for the three stones piled one upon another, though not forgotten, was carried on with less interest now. Perhaps it was fortunate the lads had not set their hearts too confidently upon finding them. They would have been disappointed, for no sign of the mark they had so often mentioned had they as yet come upon. They would have been more anxious to make immediate progress in that direction, possibly, had they known of their competition, had they even guessed that Tom Pickton was intending to see what *he* could find.

In the evening the four friends drove leisurely to Gilroy to post some letters and, they hoped,

receive some. Words can scarcely express their surprise and delight as they found Roger Falwin's card.

"Uncle Sam's gettin' purty prompt! Young chap mailed that there very same card right in this Gilroy post-office less'n two hours ago!" drawled Mr. Wimby, the postmaster. "I seen him write it."

And if Mr. Wimby was deeply impressed by the fact he mentioned, Phil, Billy, Paul and Dave were certainly no less so. Had it not been that they planned to be in Queensville the next day they would have driven there immediately.

Mail was sent from Gilroy but once a day, leaving early in the morning. The boys decided there was yet a chance that a letter mailed to Falwin at Queensville would be delivered next day, before the racing circuit would be open, and they could themselves reach the town. So a letter was written forthwith and Mr. Wimby cautioned to see to it that by no means should it be overlooked when the out-going mail

was made up. To meet Roger at the Crown Hotel was the plan the lads proposed. It would be a merry reunion.

Talking much of the Falwins and what seemed to them the remarkable circumstance of their car having actually passed along the Ship woods road, and so very near Camp Golden, and of a hundred and one things the prospective meeting with "Little Mystery" suggested, it is not strange that none of the Auto Boys heard or saw the machine that followed theirs as they rolled homeward. Nor is it strange in the least that they went to bed not even suspecting that ears other than their own were strained to catch every word of their conversation; that eyes other than their own were noting their movements and the manner of the camp's location.

Making a very early start on Thursday, the chums drove to the sharp "Ambulance station" curve as a most interesting point from which to view the racing practice. Again they shouted "Go!" and "Go!" with the passing of

every car; and again the drivers seemed not at all displeased with being thus told to do the thing they all were trying their best to accomplish. It was lively fun, yet with the meeting with Roger Falwin in view, the lads were glad when the time came to hasten on around to Queensville.

A year's time, or nearly so, had wrought not a little change in "Little Mystery." He appeared to be *more* than twelve months older—more grown, more sturdy and older in his manner. But the Auto Boys recognized their friend of the preceding summer instantly. His own glad, "Hello!" left no room for doubt, also, that he quickly recognized them as they found him waiting their coming at the hotel. Mr. Falwin was there as well, and more than pleased to see again the boys, but for whom Roger might have lived, or even died, far from his rightful home.

To have Falwin spend the rest of the day and the night with them at Camp Golden was the plan of the four friends and which, it seems

like a waste of words to say, met with his own most hearty approval. The father readily assented, of course. He proposed to call at the camp himself the next day, and the little lad could then return with him. This arrangement being quite satisfactory, though the Auto Boys were disappointed that Roger was not to remain with them longer, the Thirty was turned once again toward the Ship woods late in the afternoon.

Two facts of importance the four chums had learned as they sat with Roger and his father at dinner in the hotel. One was that, inadvertently, young Mr. Falwin had informed Soapy Gaines of the neighborhood in which they were located. The other was that the young gentleman to whom this information was given had received a black eye the same evening at the hands of one of his associates, to whom he had referred as his driver.

Quite in the course of their ordinary conversation did this intelligence, of such marked interest to the Auto Boys, appear, and they

were quite excited to learn more. Anxious were they to know whether Gaines and Pickton would still make an effort to find out their camping place; also, how Fred Perth was faring since, obviously, he had parted company with the other two of the "Chosen."

Roger could give little information. The news of the assault on Gaines he had gathered from the gossip about the hotel. He had not known who of the young man's associates had struck the blow. It was from his description that Perth was recognized.

"Here's the Clarion headquarters now," said Billy Worth, on the homeward way. "Let's see if Fred is here."

Paul Jones jumped down to go up and make inquiry as the Thirty halted. The next minute, "Be careful! Don't you poke *me* in the eye!" the boys heard him cry, laughingly, and sure enough there came Perth out to greet them all.

It was a short story that Fred had to tell, and already known to the reader. He was

noticeably glad to see the Auto Boys, and shook hands most cordially with Falwin as well. He did not know, he said, what plans Gaines and Pickton had made for the races or aught else. He was still very angry over the way Soapy had behaved, and as for Tom, felt little better toward him.

Right glad to see Perth in comfortable quarters, and not at all sorry he had severed relations with his late associates, for Fred was easily the most manly, honest and likable fellow of the three, the Auto Boys presently continued on. At lively speed they took the "Ambulance station" turn, for Billy was eager to see how well he could manage it. Then at the Thirty's best they sped over the irregular road leading on to Far Creek.

"Hold up! There's one of the racers down and out!" suddenly cried Phil Way, at Billy's side. "It's the Hare car!" he added instantly, looking intently toward a racing machine standing cross-wise of the road, on ahead. "It's the driver no one knows and *he has his mask off!*"

CHAPTER XIX

“THREE STONES TO MARK THE PLACE”

Pickton, wrapped in a blanket, lay on a cot in the white cottage but was not yet asleep when Soapy Gaines entered. By the light of the lamp, turned low, Tom saw he was in a sullen mood. Having formed his own plans as to the future, he greeted the genial Soapy pleasantly, notwithstanding.

“Hope you’ve put the finishing touches on Perth!” said he, though in his heart he knew he hoped nothing of the kind; “finishing touches,” it will be understood, meaning something in the nature of severe punishment.

“Rather think I did!” growled Gaines. “What did *you* hear about it?”

“Perth left a note. There by the lamp you’ll

find it. Just like the little idiot to make a monkey of himself!"

Soapy read Fred's scribbled lines before committing himself further. Finding that Pick knew nothing to the contrary, he said: "Perth's a liar. I was saying to a gentleman from Chicago,—a rich young fellow," (Lie Number One) "that my father expected to hire a driver and a mechanic to take care of a new limousine" (Lie Number Two) "when Perth ran up and made a pass at me. I dodged, and struck my eye against a post," (Lie Number Three) "but I didn't say a word—just landed all over the little fool" (Lie Number Four) "the way he deserved. Only hope I didn't hurt him *too much*. Anyhow, they picked him up and I understand some of the riff-raff that he's been bumming around with carried him away." (Lie Number Five.)

"Serves him right! We're all through with *him*, I hope," observed Pickton, knowing full well that Gaines was lying, but carrying

forward his own plans by not revealing the fact. "I'd like to see Perth come near *this* place again!"

"I could have him arrested if I wanted to," answered Gaines, feeling somewhat better since, in his own imagination, he had "landed all over" Fred, quite as he had told Pick. "But I'll let him go."

"I'm going to hunt him up and smash him to-morrow for lying to me. Telling that you had said I was your *mechanic*," said Pickton with a show of rage. "Let me have the car for to-morrow. You'll want to be around the hotel anyway, I suppose!"

"Don't care what you do! Needn't wear the machine out tearing over the country, though!" was the answer in decidedly sour tones.

"Why, I won't hurt a thing!" protested Tom earnestly. "Want me to call you for breakfast?"

"Break your neck if you wake me till I'm

good and ready!" the most amiable Mr. Gaines made answer coldly.

Pickton forced a laugh and said "Good-night, old man!" as if Soapy were truly his dearest friend. If he had done all he felt like doing, young Mr. Gaines' other eye would have been a better match for the one he "struck against a post."

Nevertheless, the very upright and honorable Mr. Pickton, who would certainly never stoop to so mean a thing as deceit—far from it, was quite well pleased with himself. He turned his face toward the window to be sure the morning light would wake him early, and fell asleep. If he stirred restlessly from time to time it was possibly due to regret that his friend in the next room had injured his eye—"against a post"—and the hope pervading even his dreams that Gaines suffered no pain.

Then again, Tom's restlessness may have been due to visions of uncovering hidden treasure that in disturbed dreams came to him.

However it may have been, the reader will judge for himself. The purpose of this history permits passing over the balance of the night and likewise over the very early morning to the next appearance of Thomas Pickton upon the scene, seated alone in Mr. Soapy Gaines' automobile, and driving warily in the direction of Gilroy.

Although the roads were closed to all traffic at this time of the morning for the accommodation of the racing cars in practice, Pickton relied upon the fact of there being no one upon the course to turn him back. Not until the day of the contests would the circuit be guarded. Meanwhile more than one venturesome motorist was violating the rule that closed the roads from four to ten o'clock. Nor was it altogether because he feared to meet the cars in practice that Tom proceeded cautiously. He feared even more to discover the Auto Boys.

Strange it is, but true, that good fortune is largely a matter of opinion. Pickton felt he was fortunate in reaching Gilroy without being

stopped and without meeting those he sought to avoid. Yet it would have been more fortunate for him had he been ordered from the course—had the Roadster balked or had the Auto Boys sighted him and followed him.

None of these things happening, it remains only to be said that Tom hurried past the Gilroy post-office and the group of motorists and country people gathered there to watch the last day's racing practice.

But he left the main road directly, turning down a lane which passed a small frame school-house and a somewhat larger frame church. Back of the latter building was a row of open sheds, fallen to decay and ready to topple over with the first gust of wind. They afforded a place of shelter for the horses of those who attended services. For Pickton they offered a good hiding place for the Roadster. He soon had the heavy, lumbering car under cover.

By the conversation overheard while crouching back of the trees near the Auto Boys' camp, Pickton knew it was the plan of the lads

to spend this day about the race course and in Queensville. He wondered if they had started. He hoped they would not tarry long at Gilroy. To be sure of their whereabouts was essential to his plan, however, and he went through a little field and entered Mr. Wimby's store by way of the open ware-room at the rear. He paused before going on through to the front.

There were a score of persons about the front door and about the porch. Screening himself behind a great roll of wire fencing, Pickton scrutinized the small assemblage. The boys he sought were not there. Mr. Wimby himself stood in the open doorway. Apparently a racing car had just passed and another was expected. Quickly taking in this situation, Pickton looked about the ware-house.

It was lucky for J. Wimby, perhaps, that the merchandise stored in the big room was mostly heavy and bulky. There were fencing, farm implements, cement, flour, feed, and the like, and smaller articles in crates and boxes. Pickton's quick glance noted these promptly,

but noted also that on a low shelf were a dozen or two of whetstones. Nothing else that was loose and accessible did he see; and although Tom had about as much use for a whetstone as a snapping turtle for a feather duster, he quietly slipped two of them into his inside coat pocket.

Wholly unabashed,—without even a blush, Pickton went on into the main store room, walking rapidly, as if he had just that moment entered the rear door.

He was a thief. He would not have been more guilty had he taken the contents of Mr. Wimby's cash drawer. And mark how easily he became one. He had not gone into the ware-room for the purpose of stealing, but only to see, without being seen, who was about the store. Yet so miserably, wretchedly weak was he that he made no conscious effort to resist the temptation to take something that did not belong to him.

If there had been other merchandise accessible, pocket knives,—for instance,—some-

thing he could use, undoubtedly he would have been better pleased with himself. Probably he would have taken more. As it was, he stole simply because he had the opportunity, and long training in deceitful words and actions had dulled his moral senses and warped his honor.

Similarly, when Pickton went to the camp of the Auto Boys, it was not for the purpose of stealing, at least not more than the getting of information by sneaking methods, but—but this is going in advance of the story.

Assuring himself that Phil Way and his friends were nowhere in sight about Gilroy, in tones intended to show only the most casual interest, Pickton asked Mr. Wimby if he had seen the four boys recently. The answer was yes, he had, and early enough it was, too. The "bunch" of them had driven south over the race course just at daylight.

Mr. Wimby was not at all averse to mentioning these and divers other facts, for he seized upon the opportunity to state at the same time,

and no one could miss hearing him, that he had had hardly a wink of sleep all night long. What was more, he did not expect to get one solitary wink the coming night, or Friday night either, what with the whole country having gone crazy over the races, and he, for one, would be "glad when Gilroy could get settled down to just its ordinary amount of excitement."

Further information imparted by Mr. Wimby to the effect that the Auto Boys had gone to the "Ambulance station" curve, and had said they would go on to Queensville from there, gave Pickton just the knowledge he wanted. He returned to the Roadster and five minutes later was making top speed along the Ship woods road.

In his way young Mr. Pickton was fairly shrewd. He realized that if, by chance, the Auto Boys returned to camp before he was safe away, it would be quite easy for him to evade them on foot and hard to do so in his car. He therefore left the Roadster well back from the

highway amid some underbrush that bordered the unfenced roadside before the trail leading back to the camp was reached. Confidently, then, for in this wild region he had little fear of being seen, he hastened through the fields. Crossing the creek, he mounted the slope to where the vagrant breezes softly flapped Camp Golden's tent.

"Huh! A fool for luck! They couldn't have had a better camping place made to order," observed Pickton, his hawk-like eyes taking in the pleasant and convenient surroundings. "Don't see why it is some folks get all the good luck going!" he growled to himself. "Guess maybe I'll change *theirs* some before I'm through," his reflections ran on, still in the bitter, harsh way so usual to him.

Taking some care to watch and listen that no one approached unbeknown to him, the very honorable and manly Mr. Pickton began a systematic search of the camp and its contents. Letters he found he did not hesitate to read. Pockets of coats, trousers and other clothing he

had no scruple against exploring. If at any time the voice of whatever small particle of honor or conscience he still possessed cried out in protest, he gave no sign. On the contrary, the more he pried into the affairs and the private personal belongings of those who never in their lives had done him the slightest injury, the more eagerly did he pursue his search further.

It was absolutely certain, Pick was satisfied, after reading a number of letters the boys had received and one Billy had written but failed to send, that they had not yet found the "three stones piled one upon another." He was satisfied, also, that they were anxious to discover the marker and, judging by Billy's letter, would give their time to further search when the Gold Cup race was over.

In vain did Pickton search for a map or diagram, some drawing, at least, he felt sure the four friends must have, indicating the approximate location of the spot the three stones marked. Finding nothing, he helped himself

to some fruit, some crackers and herring. But he did not enjoy the food. The venom of envy and disappointment possibly never was a desirable seasoning.

And now, although Pickton had not come to the camp with the avowed intention of stealing, he proceeded to do more than he had yet done, as deliberately as he had read the letters to which he had no right. A watch,—it was Phil Way's, and not of great value, perhaps, but Phil Way's watch, just the same,—Pick put in his pocket. With a revolver, a half-dozen postage stamps and a fountain pen he did the same. Then his gaze fell upon an automobile tire. It had never been used.

“Guess that's worth *something*,” spoke Pickton hoarsely to himself; and after some further survey of the camp and the pocketing of several trifles, a clothes-brush and MacLester's military hair-brushes among them, he picked up the tire and started toward the road. As he skulked along under cover of the brush



The three stones, the deep excavation, the pick and spade told
one story plainly. *(Page 380)*

below the hill, the realization dawned upon him that the main item of his plunder would be difficult to conceal. There was the possibility, also, that he might meet the Auto Boys returning to their camp ere he reached Queensville. They would not be slow to notice a new extra tire carried on the Roadster. Then, too, someone else might notice that the size was not that required for the Roadster's wheels.

A little reflection along these lines prompted young Mr. Pickton to turn back. He climbed the hill and walked deeper and deeper into the woods. To hide the tire until such time as he could more safely take it away was his plan. Several times he paused and looked about. Such a place of concealment as he desired seemed difficult to find. He did not wish to go too far from the road, so turned his course more in the direction of the highway.

A thicket of hazel bushes and pokeberry stalks in a comparatively open space attracting him at last, Tom went nearer. In the midst of the straggling brush was the stump of a

great tree felled many years ago. He thought possibly it was hollow, and pushed his way in to it. Though disappointed to find no opening in the stump, he did observe that at its base the thicket quite concealed him from view. It was thus a good hiding place, anyway. He placed inside the tire the watch, revolver, pen, brushes, and whatever he had stolen from the camp, excepting only the postage stamps, then deposited all at the stump's base.

Covering the plunder with leaves, Pickton carefully made his way out to the open again. He walked all around the copse, minutely inspecting its interior. Satisfied at last that no one passing could possibly observe the mound he left, he was turning away.

At the margin of the thicket he chanced to see some stones. A low growth of vegetation beneath the pokeberry branches above partially concealed them.

Just a little curious, Pickton kicked the green stalks aside. He then saw there were three stones, and—

“One was just a big field stone, the second was rough and flat, and the third, which was at the top, was the kind called conglomerate.”

Like one in a dream Pickton stood gazing, dazed and speechless as he realized what he had found—*“three stones piled one on top of another to mark the place.”*

Startled and frightened, though he knew not why, he walked rapidly away. Again and again he looked back and in all directions. He saw no one, but a deep-rooted fear that he had been watched, that he was being followed, seized upon him, and he ran.

CHAPTER XX

THE MAN IN THE MASK

“Glad to give you any help we can,” called Phil Way; for a half minute after the driver of the disabled racer had been recognized as “the man of mystery,” the Thirty was alongside of his machine.

“Very good of you, but I’d prefer that you keep a-going,” the man answered coldly.

“All *right*, Mr. Mystery!” piped Paul Jones, tartly. “Since that’s the way you feel about it, Mr. Mat McKeall!”

The racing driver sprang up instantly. In about four steps and a half he passed around his car to the Auto Boys’ machine. Billy Worth, at the wheel, was watching Phil for the signal to go or stay. Way, on the other hand, dismayed by Jones’ words and manner,

stared back in surprise at that young gentleman in the tonneau, his whole expression a question mark.

"What was that?—Or, I should say, I meant no offense in the way I spoke to you," Mr. "Mystery" began, evidently speaking just to gain time while reflecting as to what he really wished to say. "Why did you call me McKeall?" he asked more calmly, looking toward Jones.

"Because you *are* Mr. McKeall. I've seen you in Knight & Wilder's garage in Lannington," replied Paul promptly. "You went there to show them about the Poynter car and you are the designer and the engineer of the Poynter Company. So you see we know all about it," he added with a confident grin.

Jones' manner was so very frank, his smile so honest and he appeared so pleased at being able to identify the mysterious driver that the latter was forced to smile in return.

"You can trust us not to talk," Phil Way felt moved to say.

"Now look here, all of you!" the man spoke up quickly and again very seriously. "I am the man my friend here,"—nodding toward Paul—"takes me to be. I am driving the *Hare* because I am now with that company and no longer with the Poynter. My agreement with the Poynter people was that nothing be known of my change before July. Just why is neither here nor there. It's simply business. Now what can I depend on you very sensible appearing young men to do about it?"

"Keep our mouths shut!" ejaculated Paul. "But I don't think you needed to have told us to drive on the way you did."

"I suppose not," was the answer, conciliatingly. "Here!" and the driver wrote a few words in a memorandum book, tore out the leaf and handed it to Jones. "Take this to the *Hare* headquarters opposite the Queensville Court House Friday night sometime. It's an order for a box in the grandstand for the races. If I can feel sure you are all going to keep tight tongues, I'll drive. If I can't be certain, I am

simply barred out. It's all up to you, boys!"

Could he feel sure? Could Mat McKeall, designer and practically the father of the Poynter car, easily one of the nation's foremost men, in the eyes of the Auto Boys at least,—could Mat McKeall feel sure of their keeping faith with him? Most certainly he *could*. They were pleased and proud beyond measure only to be addressed by him. To be able to do him a favor was their greatest pleasure as, in this case, it was also their honor-bound duty.

In substance this is just what all of them told Mr. "Mystery." They thanked him for the order for the grandstand box, but assured him no such present was needed to bind their secrecy. But he would not take back the note from his memo book, saying briefly the box would be unoccupied if not used by the boys; that he would be disappointed if he did not see them in their seats there at the start of the race. Then he assured his new friends that his car was not seriously disabled and that he would overtake and pass them within a mile or two.

With this quite sufficient suggestion, the boys bade him good-by. Nor had they proceeded but a little way beyond the Far Creek Mill when the *Hare* came up behind. They drew out to one side and the racer whizzed past at terrific speed. Mr. "Mystery" was in his mask again, but he flung out his hand in recognition of the lads, and as if saying, "I'm depending on you!"

Joyful in the extreme, the Auto Boys and the always merry Roger Falwin leisurely pursued their way to Gilroy. They had had no expectation of anything better than the fence along the course, somewhere, as their seats for the races. To have a grandstand box placed at their disposal was like a page from some fairy tale come true. And in the knowledge of Mr. "Mystery's" identity that had come to them, they had the most zestful interest imaginable.

Only in low, solemn tones did they speak of him. It seemed almost like a breach of faith to pronounce his true name at all, so they re-

solved that, even among themselves, they should not do so.

Stopping only for their mail at Gilroy, the five lads turned toward Camp Golden at increased speed. Roger was as eager to see, as the Auto Boys were keen to show him, the many desirable features of the location of that habitation. Much interested was he, also, in the prospect that his friends would make their expedition profitable as well as pleasant. He recalled with many a gleeful laugh the experiences of the preceding summer, and could hardly wait, he declared, to sample again the work of "The very greatest artist in camp cookery,"—meaning Billy, of course,—“that ever greased a skillet.”

It was nearly five o'clock when the Thirty left Gilroy, and the boys stopped at the bleak farmhouse at which they had made arrangements for their milk supply. They obtained their usual well-filled two-quart, covered jars—carried thus for greater safety against spilling

their contents—and Mrs. Pride, (who was not at all what her name implied) gave them also two fine custard pies she had baked expressly for them.

The circumstance is worthy of mention as illustrating how well liked the Auto Boys were wherever they went. Somehow they found it easy to become excellent friends quickly with nearly everyone, no matter whom. Their own kindness, courtesy and consideration of the rights of others—their strict adherence to the principles of the Golden Rule—made them welcome even among strangers.

Paul Jones said he and his associates “just naturally made a three-base hit with everybody.” Phil Way expressed it: “Other people seem disposed to make themselves agreeable to us because we try to be agreeable ourselves.” But whichever was the correct way of stating the case, the principle and the principal fact were the same—the Auto Boys made friends everywhere.

“Blessed good thing we have these pies!”

exclaimed Billy Worth, with deep appreciation in his tones. "Hold that carefully now, Awkwardness!" he ejaculated as Paul nearly let the pie in his hands fall when with a bump the Thirty ran down the steep bank of the trail leading back to the camp. "Worried myself half sick to know what we'd have for dessert!—And company, too! You let that pie fall, Paul Jones, and I'll see to it that you get no more than a look at one for supper!"

Which dire threat caused young Mr. Jones to betray the greatest uneasiness. He held to the pie tightly with both hands, his face bearing an expression of unlimited alarm. Roger laughed gleefully to see him. And then just to amuse himself and the young guest the more, Paul watched his opportunity and when Billy was not looking, tossed the precious pie into the air. Twice it turned over and adroitly he caught it as it dropped.

Merrily—oh, merrily Roger laughed then. To him Paul was an unending source of interest and amusement.

"Been somebody here!" Dave MacLester burst forth harshly. He had gone forward to the tent the moment the Thirty paused at the top of the ascent leading to the broad ledge where the camp was made. "Should say there *has* been somebody here!" he cried more loudly, looking about carefully.

The disarranged equipage of Camp Golden, the disorder in the tent and the subsequent discovery that various articles were missing, caused the Auto Boys the gravest concern. They could not imagine who the miscreant might be, or why anyone should wish to do them injury.

Not an enemy had they, of whom they knew. Even the Chosen Trio they rated as being hostile only to the extent of wishing to carry out a trouble-making and annoying plan of their own, considering it only as a huge joke, spiteful though it was.

Except for the circumstance that the Trio had learned the locality of their camp through Roger Falwin's chance remark, the chums

would not have thought of connecting any of the members of that band of associates with the robbery. As it was, they were doubtful. They could have wished Roger had not happened to meet Gaines, as he did.

The friends made a rough inventory of the articles missing while discussing all phases of their loss; and then, as careful search failed to discover any clue to the thief's identity, Phil Way wisely suggested that they let the subject pass, for the time at least. Otherwise it would utterly spoil the pleasant evening they had promised themselves, and leave them none the better for their worry and unavailing talk.

Resolute adherence to this plan proved its wisdom. Phil showed Falwin the many fine features of the camp while Billy prepared supper. Dave put the car in order for the night and Paul devoted himself to his much despised task of "toting" firewood.

"Get I better help you galer lat wood," called Roger with a laugh, purposely using the lisping way of speaking the Auto Boys had so

loved to hear that former summer. It made the others laugh, too, and certainly it was like the charming little chap—just like him, to be wanting to help someone—to pitch in with a will to do his share of all the work.

After supper the boys had a most pleasant evening around their campfire. It was very sweet to hear Roger's clear, cheery voice and his bright comment and remarks as the adventures of last year's outing were recalled, as the prospects in the big race were discussed and the story of how Gaines and his crowd were left behind in Lannington was told him. And how he did enjoy, also, the story of the adventure in Cowslip marshes when Marshal Wellock's car was hauled out of the swamp!

Quite naturally, Mr. "Mystery" was first favorite of the Auto Boys and of Falwin, too, as they talked of Saturday's probable winners. As a capable driver he could hardly be excelled. His car rated well alongside the others. If there was any reason to believe he would not secure the cup, it was in the fact that he would

not take the desperate chances and incur the risks that Kemper, of the *Clarion*, would, for instance. Very earnestly the lads agreed in hoping the *Hare's* pilot would not drive recklessly. They would rather see him defeated, they declared, than have his life endangered.

All in all, the chance recognition of Mr. "Mystery" and its consequence had given the five friends a lively personal interest in the race they had not felt before. One result was their decision that no further work in the woods should be attempted until Monday. They would make Friday a holiday and some time after supper drive to Queensville. They would have to be there, anyway, before five o'clock Saturday morning, for after that hour no one would be allowed upon the course, and over its entire length it would be guarded.

Buoyantly happy over the pleasant prospect in view, their thoughts disturbed only by fleeting reflections concerning the robbery, Camp Golden's occupants sat up late. But they slept well and if they had retired later than was their

custom, possibly they made up for it next morning. Certain it is that breakfast was not ready until nearly eight o'clock, though six was the customary hour. And after that meal of bacon, eggs, toast and coffee was over, the lads were reluctant to stir about with their usual liveliness.

"Just to be good and lazy and loaf and loaf and loaf is pretty good fun, too, when you feel like it," observed Paul Jones with a tremendous yawn, his back against a tree, his legs outstretched before him.

"Which is a big share of the time with some folks," Billy exclaimed, with sudden energy. He sprang up and ordered all hands to fall to at the dish-washing while he "put the butter away." Which latter remark, accompanied with a grin that would have done even Paul Jones credit, provoked a laugh, of course.

Yet it was Worth's privilege as cook to leave the washing of the dishes to others; and so while he did return the butter and other provisions to the improvised spring-house, Phil

and the rest made short work of the major portion of that labor which—and it is one of the lifelong regrets of all mankind—necessarily must follow every breakfast, and every dinner and every supper.

But to enter upon any task with a will and with cheerfulness takes the sting out of work's necessity always, just as surely as to do otherwise makes drudgery of any kind of labor. And in this instance it was nothing less than fun to join in, with jolly Roger Falwin helping, and finish up the entire dish-washing performance in "a little less than no time," as that young gentleman himself expressed it.

The thought comes to me many times that really the most enjoyable things in the Auto Boys' good times were just those hours of care-free quiet and contentment about their campfires by daytime or in the evening; the sweet restfulness of their own congenial company and nothing to disturb or annoy as they went about the various light tasks together. And if I have let my own mind dwell too long

upon such scenes, it is only because I believe everyone who has known the joys of camping likes to hear of the blessed tranquillity others have found in similar manner.

But another pleasure of the joyous campers, to-day, was a long stroll through the woods to show Roger where and how the ginseng grew and incidentally to watch for signs of strangers whose notions of right and wrong might be subject to correction. No trace of such offending neighbors was discovered, but as such discovery had not been expected, the fact was no disappointment.

Indeed, the boys were better satisfied, perhaps, to find no evidence that someone beside themselves was frequenting this section of the big woods. They were the more content to believe the thieves visiting their camp had been some chance passersby, attracted by the trail of their car leading back from the road. If this were true, a return visit was little to be feared, though for greater security all articles of par-

ticular value were now secreted before leaving the camp unguarded.

Before lunch time a swim in the deep pool just below the camp was enjoyed. Evidences of this diversion in shape of bare feet, wet, uncombed hair and a generally scanty attire were still present when the searching notes of an automobile horn were heard. Roger at once recognized the car and, just as they were, the boys all rushed out to the main road to guide Mr. Falwin back to the camp.

Now to say that the father of young Mr. Roger Comfort Falwin was delighted with the cool, dry and airy situation of Camp Golden and equally pleased with its tenants is quite inadequate. He expressed himself as pleased immeasurably.

He had brought sundry additions to the noonday repast in shape of sardines, sandwiches and a watermelon and it remains only to be said that splendid appetites were given free rein a little later. Just as hungry as any

of the boys, too, was Mr. Falwin himself, and he paid Billy Worth the compliment of saying he had never tasted better coffee than that youthful master in the culinary art provided.

So extremely agreeable were the Falwins, both father and son, that the Auto Boys bade them good-by with really deep regret. There was consolation in the promise that Roger would share their box for the races next day, as Mr. Falwin would be with some friends elsewhere; also, that the merry little chap would return to camp with them on Saturday to remain over Sunday. But for the present there was no alternative than to say farewell.

“Better get a small snooze this afternoon; we’ll be up practically all night and were up so late last night!” suggested Phil Way when the boys were alone again. It seems hardly necessary to state that the proposal met with instant favor; hardly necessary to state, either, that for nearly three hours following, the camp was as calm and quiet as the drowsy June afternoon itself.

What another day would bring forth remained to be seen. For the present there was no sound but the lullaby of the soft breeze in the beech and chestnut branches overhead—provided only that a subdued snoring from the bunk MacLester occupied be excepted.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MORNING OF THE RACE

What with a late supper in camp, then loitering for an hour or two afterward at Gilroy, it was approaching ten o'clock when the Auto Boys turned their car onto the road of the racing circuit for Queensville. But even at this hour scores of cars were coming and going. From every point of the compass it seemed, automobile owners and all the friends they could crowd into their cars were heading toward the races. In both directions along the course shone the lights of scores of machines. On either hand there sounded constantly the blare of the horns.

Thinking the back way around to Queensville, that is, the road past Far Creek Sawmill and on through Chester, would be less congested

than the nearer route, Billy steered in the southerly direction. But if this route was really the better one, the other must have been crowded, indeed. There seemed to be not a hundred yards together on the entire twenty-six-mile circuit that did not show one or more automobiles.

And the noise! Thomas, Richard and Henry, Elizabeth, Jane and Marie, were tooting motor horns, fish horns and horns of all descriptions. They were calling out to one another and to everybody and nobody. They were singing, shouting, laughing. The whole countryside, it was evident—all who owned motor cars, at least, and many in buggies and wagons—had turned out to make a night of it. By the license number plates on cars they noted, the Auto Boys were certain that not less than six different states were represented among the enthusiasts and the merely curious gathered here for the great race.

Going slowly to see much of this queer spectacle of night being turned into day, noting with

interest the dozens of campfires, the scores of cars parked here and there at points where the owners had elected to remain for the balance of the night and from which to view the race, the Auto Boys arrived in Queensville. They went at once to the headquarters of the *Hare* and its crew, quite concerned that they were so late in calling for their grandstand tickets.

The imposing box coupons were obtained without difficulty, however, for a young man was waiting to deliver them. He looked the four lads over curiously as if wondering who they might be and why "Mystery" had so favored them. But he asked no questions and made no comment except to say, "Thought there was to be five of ye." Phil answered that the fifth member was to be picked up later.

Then as the young gentleman showed no inclination to converse further, the boys left him. But they could not fail to notice the absence of excitement around the *Hare* quarters. A couple of men were playing cards by the light of lanterns, but those who would have most to

do with the race had retired to rest long before. Those remaining up were there principally to guard the camp and the safety of the racing car, it was evident.

The plan of the Auto Boys was to meet Roger Falwin at the grandstand entrance, just before the start of the first race, at six o'clock. They had intended remaining in the town until daylight, but the increasing probability of trouble and delay in getting to the course, if they did so, caused them to reconsider. .

Even at midnight the guards of the state militia were on the march to different points of the course and it would not be long until all traffic would be barred from these roads. Meanwhile the noise and excitement had subsided somewhat and the desirability of obtaining a little sleep became more apparent to the lads.

With this in view they turned their car toward the great grandstand just beyond the town. They would find a place for the Thirty, they thought, in a wooded field near by. The

charges for parking spaces fronting the course were high and they had no wish to pay a fancy price for a position which to them would be of no especial value.

A location such as they desired was found in due season. For the modest sum of two dollars they were allowed to run their machine back among some trees a few hundred yards distant from the stand of the judges of the race which was directly opposite the main stand for spectators.

Many other cars were in this field, some of their occupants seeking to rest, some eating, drinking and making merry around small campfires. Still others were merely waiting, wearily yawning, too tired even to talk, but hesitating to go to sleep for fear they might not awake in time.

Each with a blanket about him, Phil and Dave lay down on the ground. Billy and Paul shared another blanket, stretching themselves out in the tonneau; but even now the east was

brightening. The day of the Gold Cup race had come.

It was nearly two hours later,—about half after five—that Phil Way roused his friends from their broken slumbers. Telling them they must hasten if they wished to get a bit of breakfast before the races started, he stirred them to activity. Quite gay and lively they lined up before a refreshment tent near by to partake of coffee and sandwiches. True, a chance to bathe and to make a proper toilette would have been most welcome and refreshing; but the boys were by no means by themselves in doing without such civilized facilities. Nearly everyone of the hundreds, already coming and going, looked sleepy, tired and dirty. Sleeping with one's clothes on certainly has its drawbacks.

The day had come clear and warm—as perfect as even a June day well could be. Even the racing cars seemed to feel its bright influence, judging by the noise they made. Like

repeated volleys from guns was the rattle of their sharp explosions. Quite in keeping with their noise, too, were the shouts of the vendors of refreshments and souvenirs, and the constant honk-honk of the automobiles hastening to their places on all sides of the main stand.

The militia and special officers had been astir long before,—if they had been asleep at all,—and were stationed everywhere. Race officials decked with elaborate badges, all very, very important personages, it was evident, moved here and there. Rapidly the crowds were gathering now. A perfect stream of humanity poured into the grandstand and every moment the increasing number of automobiles entering the parking ground at the rear was bringing more.

“Don’t see where Jack can *be*,” spoke Phil Way, using the name which he nearly always gave Roger Falwin. “It’s five minutes of six! Go on in and find our box, you fellows. I’ll wait for him here by the gate.”

The boys had finished their hasty breakfast

and for some minutes had impatiently awaited Roger's coming. All eager to see the first car off, their nerves at high tension with the noise and excitement everywhere, they were anxious to be in their seats yet loath to enter the stand without their friend. Way's suggestion seemed the best solution of the problem. Just as Billy, Paul and Dave found their box the starter was counting the seconds to give the word to the driver of car Number One.

"Go!" he cried, and with a terrific ripping, snorting and flashing of smoke and fire the machine was off, while the great crowd cheered vociferously.

The first race was for the small cars—four laps of the twenty-six-mile circuit, or a trifle more than one hundred miles. The more important contest,—that for the heavy cars—was to be started at half past eight. One minute apart the five entrants in the light car race were sent away. Then the noisy crowd settled down to comparative quiet to await the completion of the circuit.

More and more impatiently Phil awaited Falwin's coming. At last he went into the grandstand and found his chums.

"Where could Roger be? What could have detained him so?" they asked one another. It was his father's plan that he should spend the night at the apartments they had obtained in Queensville, to meet some old friends of the family arriving from Chicago during the afternoon. Mr. Falwin and they intended viewing the race from the grandstand, however, and he had said they would surely be present to see the first car sent away. Why had he failed?

Not for a moment did the four friends consider that harm might have befallen the lad they hoped to have with them. They were only disappointed that he was not present to share their fun and the fine seats they had so luckily obtained. Thus after a time, having left word with the man taking tickets at the entrance as to where they were if inquiry should be made, they gave their thoughts more completely to the race.

Despite the long waits between the passing of the cars, and their reappearance with each completion of the circuit, the time passed quickly. From the beginning the light car contest was hardly more than a "procession," as Paul called it; yet it was interesting, too. One never knew when this or that machine flashed past where it might or might not be, with reference to its racing position, when again it should come into view.

On the other hand there were few exciting incidents. With the exception of the wrecking of the *Sailor*, in a bad spill at the "Ambulance station" curve, as those familiar with these races will recall, no particular occurrence marked the light car contest. The machines finished with the *Dandy* leading comfortably and the *Messenger* a fair second.

There was a marked revival of enthusiasm in the big grandstand when the heavy cars came noisily onto the course. The *Clarion* was the first favorite, although the *Hare* was also given a lively welcome by the cheering

crowd. The *Henry*, the *Wings* and other contestants had their friends, as well, and then too, there were plenty of spectators who seemed bent on applauding anything and everything. They would have cheered "a wheelbarrow, if one happened to be trundled past," Paul Jones said, and most probably he was right.

One minute apart, the drivers of the big cars received the word to go. One minute apart they rolled easily away, then picking up speed, dashed faster and faster down the fine stretch of oiled road toward Queensville and like a flash disappeared at last over a rise of ground.

Mr. "Mystery" glanced once toward the Auto Boys' box, just as the *Hare* was pushed up to the tape. He threw up a hand as if in recognition of the lads, and it can not be doubted that, amid all the thunder of applause given him, he heard their shrill voices rising even above those of the advertising staff of the *Hare* concern.

"Oh! Listen to me! If there isn't our

friend, the Sagersgrove detective!" exclaimed Billy Worth suddenly, during the lull that followed the sending off of the last racing driver. And sure enough, there was Eli Gouger, wearing a special guard's badge, and apparently deeply impressed by its bright red hue, or his own importance, or perhaps both. But Mr. Gouger was too occupied with maintaining the dignity of his office to notice the Auto Boys, though their box was at the front of the stand and only a few feet back from the course where he patrolled up and down.

The sight of Mr. Gouger and the recollection of their experiences upon the road set the four boys talking of Soapy Gaines and Pickton, wondering where they might be, and wishing they could have a sight of Freddy Perth—see the part he had in the big race in connection with the *Clarion's* signal service.

The reader's attention also must now be turned to the gentlemanly Mr. Gaines and his fond and loyal associate, Mr. Thomas Pickton. The latter, it will be recalled when last men-

tioned, was fleeing from his own guilty conscience and the remarkable discovery so suddenly made by him in the Ship woods.

And it happened, as Pick plunged forward, scarcely aware of his direction, that he came directly upon an abandoned trail or logging road. It was the overgrown lane among the trees, mentioned earlier in these pages as marking the boundary of territory to be explored by Billy and Dave that day the boys began their systematic search of the forest. The trail led out to the public road, and toward that thoroughfare Tom hastened.

The panic-stricken boy slackened his speed more and more, now that he could see his way clear to the general highway. At last he stopped still. He must fix the location of the old trail firmly in his mind, he decided. It would be a convenient way in which to return to the thicket and that mysterious spot marked by the three stones. He could even run the Roadster directly back into the woods, so concealing the machine while at the same time

having it close by him. For there was no question in Pickton's mind but that he would soon come back to the very place he had so hurriedly quitted. Just why he had run away, he did not ask himself. He knew only that he would not permit a similar sudden excitement and alarm to seize and unnerve him another time.

All the way to the Roadster, hidden back in the brush beyond the entrance to Camp Golden, it will be remembered, Tom was busily planning. Sneaking forward cautiously, lest at any moment he might see the Auto Boys returning, and in turn be seen by them, he decided that Saturday, the day of the race, would be the time for him to visit the woods again.

On that day the Auto Boys would undoubtedly be at the race course until late. On that day, too, he could most conveniently elude Soapy Gaines and get well away from him with the machine. All trembling with excitement and his keen desire to find the treasure whose hiding place he knew he had discovered, he yet

frowned darkly as he sent the heavy Roadster speeding on toward Queensville; and it was a frown of selfishness and wrongful determination.

On Friday Pickton avoided Gaines and saw but little of him until evening. Soapy was not in a good humor. It was not an easy matter to flatter and cajole him into doing as he, Tom, desired that he should do. Patience and perseverance were necessary. In the end they succeeded. Gaines agreed to dispense with the use of his car, and Pickton, as driver, as a means of going to the race course, on the latter's plea that in such a crowd the automobile would be more trouble than the ride was worth.

Tom urged going to the grandstand in one of the public conveyances; and Soapy having been brought finally, though reluctantly, to this way of thinking, did just as was expected of him—soon went off by himself. He would rather remain up all night, around the hotels, than retire only to rise at the early hour necessary to see the races started, he told Pickton.

But he did not suggest that the latter accompany him; did not so much as inquire what his friend's plans for seeing the contests might be.

Perhaps it was just as well he did not. Pickton thereby was saved the telling of a few more lies, and he certainly had been guilty of a great number already. He saw Soapy safely out of sight, then tied up in a newspaper a couple of sandwiches, three or four bananas and some crackers. He emptied his suitcase and placed his lunch in it.

But something more than food, something more than clothing, something suitcases did not often contain, would be in this case of his before many more hours passed, he reflected. Just what, he did not know. He was only sure that treasure awaited him, and it would be his and his alone. He still frowned and a cold, selfish, grasping expression it was that shone in his hawk-like eyes as he went out of the cottage and closed the door.

The town was still noisy and bright with lights. The main streets were filled with

people and with automobiles and other vehicles, though it now was after midnight. Pickton backed the Roadster from its shed and quietly as he could, his guilty feelings making him constantly afraid he would hear some voice cry out, "Stop thief! Stop thief!" he turned toward Gilroy.

Taking the nearest route to that hamlet, he was easily clear of the roads comprising the racing circuit before they were closed to traffic. A score of machines were parked near the Gilroy corner store and others were arriving. Pick feared greatly he would find the Auto Boys' car there and slipped by with all care to attract no notice. Extremely relieved was he upon learning a little later that the four chums had started around by the southerly route to Queensville several hours earlier.

Then forward the guilty youth went. No one cried, "Turn back!" No friendly voice urged, "Don't! don't go!" Or, if so, that voice was only in Tom's conscience and he stifled it with the thought that all he should find would be for

himself alone. He would need share not a penny with anyone.

So did Pickton come soon after daylight to the old logging trail leading into the forest. Driving in he managed notwithstanding much low underbrush to make his way with the machine back to the point where he had first come upon the trail in his panic and fright the second day before.

How still,—how hushed the great woods seemed! The very quiet all about him made Tom nervous and fearful. But he ran the automobile to the shelter of some low beeches, then, boldly as he could, went forward to the thicket not far distant. He knew the place at once. His eyes gleamed in a kind of quite savage triumph as he saw again—"Three stones piled one upon another to mark the place."

CHAPTER XXII

SUSPICION

There was very good reason for Roger Falwin's failure to meet the Auto Boys as appointed, and enjoy the race with them. The fault was not his own. A minor accident that caused his missing of the appointment indirectly caused much else beside, as later developments will make clear.

Spending the late afternoon and evening with the friends who had but that day arrived for the races, Mr. Falwin and Roger would have been glad to retire in good season to be astir very early next day. However, Mr. Kurl and Mr. Widerly, their friends, protested. No need of going to bed, they laughingly argued. They wished to take a run over the racing circuit. They would be able, with knowledge so

gained, to follow the progress of the different contestants next day much more intelligently.

The loss of just one night's sleep wouldn't amount to much, anyway, they jovially insisted. "And who *could* sleep with all the town in a din and an uproar?" pursued Mr. Kurl, a jolly, portly young man. "You take your car, Falwin, and Widerly with you. Roger is going to ride with me. He's just the pilot I need for this blessed wilderness of strange roads."

In such manner it was, then, that the Falwins and their friends chanced to set out for a circuit of the race course though it was past midnight. They would have ample time to complete the twenty-six miles and be again in Queensville before the roads were closed.

"Time! There's time for everything! People just get in the bad habit of thinking there isn't. The way to do is simply go ahead with whatever's before you. Don't bother about the time. That's my philosophy," said Mr. Kurl cheerily. And then as if time really were the last thing to be taken into account, he pro-

posed a lunch at one of the numerous stands still open for business.

Mr. Widerly was a calm, quiet man of about Mr. Falwin's age—somewhat older than his lively friend, Mr. Kurl. Roger was glad that, since he was to ride with one of them, it was to be with the more jolly fellow, and entered into the spirit of the fun with all that zestful enthusiasm so characteristic of him. He would not, for once, regard time as being of any consequence, he agreed with Mr. Kurl, though he clearly saw that a rather rapid ride would be necessary if the trip around the course were to be successfully completed.

Quite probably the inspection of the racing circuit would have been finished as planned but for the circumstance that at the far side of the course a spare tire was accidentally thrown off Mr. Kurl's car. The brackets suddenly gave way and the tire was flung far to the roadside. Then it proceeded to roll—no one knew where. Roger saw the extra shoe, or casing, go spinning from its place and instantly called a halt.

Mr. Falwin and Mr. Widerly, coming on behind, also stopped and joined in the search that immediately began.

The scene of the mishap was in the wooded section west of Far Creek Sawmill. Here, under the trees and among the thickets, the darkness was such that without the oil lamps from the automobiles there would have been not the least hope of the tire being discovered before daylight. As it was, the two cars were run well to one side to permit the easy passage of the many travelers bound for the races, and an extended search begun.

The whole endeavor was unsuccessful. The early dawn broke over the woodland and slowly daylight filtered through the leaves of the trees. Then, and not until then, was the lost tire found—found in the midst of some May-apples quite covered up by the broad, low-growing leaves.

“And ‘Sheridan twenty miles away!’” facetiously quoted Mr. Kurl, looking at his watch.

"Oh, don't bother about *time*. There's time for everything," laughed Mr. Falwin.

But he knew, and Roger knew, there was little reason to hope the trip could be completed before the races were over. Nor were they wrong. They sent their cars flying on past Far Creek and around the turn to Gilroy, as if they were practicing for the race themselves; but it was of no use. At Gilroy post-office a guard stood in the road, his upraised hand commanding them to halt. Evidently fearing they might be disposed to refuse, two other guards ran into the roadway, at the same moment, with bayonets presented.

It was far from the intentions of any of the men to disobey the order or to ignore the rules of the course. To make the best of their predicament was their whole plan and they backed their cars to the roadside, leaving them in such position that from their seats the passing of the racers could be comfortably viewed. Then, as there was yet some time before the first of the racers would appear, all repaired

to a refreshment stand some enterprising Gilroy citizen had set up, there to obtain breakfast.

It was a grievous disappointment to Roger that he could not be with the Auto Boys, and the more so because he had promised to meet them. They would be expecting him and there was no way of letting them know why and where he was detained. Still, being a sensible person, he resolved he would not worry, and since there was nothing else he could do, he set out to make the best of an annoying situation.

From a telephone station established temporarily at Gilroy came the word at six o'clock that the light car race had started. It was but a little later that the first of the contestants flashed past on down the road furiously. Another and another followed and each received from the Gilroy assemblage a rousing cheer and that unfailing command, request, admonition—call it what you will,—to “go!” It was all very interesting and exciting, but Roger could not but think how much more fun

it would have been had he been in that grandstand box with the Auto Boys.

The morning passed. The heavy car race was well under way. Indeed, it had already become slightly monotonous to those gathered at Gilroy. They received only the meager information the one telephone operator could give concerning the progress of different machines. How they missed the latest news such as "Car Number Five has passed Far Creek"—"Car Number One passed Number Three at Chester"—and much more of like character, they knew the official announcer was crying out before the main grandstand!

Naturally Roger was an ardent champion of "Mystery" and the *Hare*, but when Mr. Kurl, and even his father, asked him why his sympathy centered so noticeably in that direction he only smiled. Not for a great deal would he have violated the confidence Mat McKeall had reposed in him and his friends. Changing the subject quite adroitly, as Mr. Kurl sought to tease him about his preference, the lad said

he would go over to Mr. Wimby's store and see if he could not obtain some better candy than the refreshment stand offered.

There was a crowd of country people on the porch of the Gilroy store. The sheds back of the church, a little way distant, sheltered more horses and more buggies, carriages, and wagons, undoubtedly, than on any very recent Sunday. At least Mr. Wimby said so, and, being immensely pleased with his little joke, he lost no opportunity to repeat his remark to every newcomer. Yet possibly all he said was true. For miles around father, mother and the children had made a holiday for the race.

Among those gathered in and near the Gilroy store, as Roger Falwin entered, was Mrs. Pride, from the farm where the Auto Boys obtained milk, and by whom they had come to be most favorably regarded. She and Mr. Wimby stood apart from the crowd, in earnest conversation, as Roger stepped up to make his inquiry for fresh candy.

“And right here comes a boy that's a friend

of theirs!" exclaimed Mrs. Pride, noticing Falwin for the first time. "Now Jesse Wimby, you just tell him all about it. I ain't had no peace of mind this day!"

"Certainly I *am* their friend, if you mean Phil Way and Billy and Paul and Dave. Don't you remember? I was with them at your house," said Roger.

"Land's sakes! To be sure! I remembered you the minute I seen ye! An' it was the very evenin' you went home to their camp with 'em that they found the burg-u-lars had been there! To be sure, I remember, an' was tellin' Jesse Wimby this very minute—Now, Jesse, you just tell him!"

Mrs. Pride spoke fast and excitedly, and Roger was quite disturbed by the stress she placed upon her request that he be informed of—something affecting the Auto Boys closely, it was apparent.

"I calc'late t' tell him, Mrs. Pride, if ye'll jest give me half a chanct!" replied Mr. Wimby, visibly irritated; but as he continued

he spoke so slowly,—just as he thought, just as he did everything—that many times the excitable Mrs. Pride broke in, “Jesse Wimby, *will ye tell him, or will I?*” By such degrees there was, however, imparted to Roger Falwin information that interested him exceedingly, though it perplexed him very much.

A short time before Roger entered the store, it developed, Mr. Wimby and Mrs. Pride had been speaking of the robbery of the camp of their friends, the Auto Boys, in the Ship woods. Mr. Wimby, very confidentially—“‘not out an’ out accusin’ anybody, mind ye”—told of the theft of two whetstones from his ware-room and said he suspected a certain young fellow who had been at the store that day making inquiry about the young campers. Later he had seen this same youth drive in the direction of the woods in a “three-seated” automobile. Also, the same boy and the same car had very early this morning again gone out on the Ship woods road.

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Pride had,

to use her own expression "put two and two together." One item was the theft of the whetstones and the robbery the Auto Boys suffered the same day. Item number two was the circumstance that Mrs. Pride's husband had seen a boy in a "three-seated" car drive into the old logging trail of the Ship woods soon after daylight this morning.

Mr. Pride, it appeared, had been out to see that a certain fence was secure so that his sheep would not get out, stray on to the road and be run over by the racing machines (six miles distant). He had noticed the automobile and its solitary occupant and was just curious enough to watch them, until, to his surprise, they suddenly turned into the old trail of the loggers and disappeared. Being anxious to go early to the races, he had given the matter no further thought.

From the description of the "three-seated" car and its driver, Roger Falwin believed he recognized Soapy Gaines' Roadster and, perhaps, that young gentleman himself; or if not

him, one of his associates, at least. What was to be done about it? There could be little doubt that one or more of Gaines' party had discovered the Auto Boys' camping place. That he was at least partly responsible, because of the information he had unintentionally let slip, Roger was well aware. The whole situation disturbed him greatly.

"Just let's keep this all quiet," he said at last to Mrs. Pride and Mr. Wimby. "I'll get word to Phil Way, somehow, and we'll drive to the woods. That chap can't and probably won't try to go back to town till the races are over. We'll catch him on the road in, if nowhere else."

The suggestion pleased Mr. Wimby because it relieved him of all responsibility. Also it pleased Mrs. Pride because, if results came of the undertaking, she would have the credit for having "put two and two together."

Roger returned to his father and their friends. He told of all that had happened and of his own plan to intercept the Roadster some-

where between the Ship woods and Queensville.

"Let me have our car, Father," said he, "and the moment the race ends I'll hustle through to the grandstand. You and Mr. Kurl and Mr. Widerly stay here by the store and watch to see if the fellow in the Roadster comes in from the woods. And lest he might slip by, somehow, Phil and the other fellows and I will divide up, some taking one way, the rest another, and come directly to Gilroy again. Then if nothing has turned up, we'll hike right on to the woods together."

If Mr. Falwin at first demurred, or if Mr. Kurl sought to make a joke of the whole matter, is not material. The main fact is that before the race was over Roger had obtained full consent to put his plan into execution. And from that moment even "Mystery" and the *Hare* interested him only passively. Eagerly he awaited the waving of the yellow flag, the signal passed from point to point all about the circuit, that the race was finished.

At last it came, "Kemper wins!" "Mystery second!" The announcements from the telephone station were but two minutes apart. The remaining contestants were not allowed to finish. In another five minutes—almost before the friends of the favorite drivers were done cheering—the yellow signals had been flashed from post to post, and the Gold Cup Race was over.

Like a flash Roger Falwin was upon the course. Obtaining a fine start ahead of most of the machines soon pouring on to the now open roads, the miles slipped rapidly from under his splendid car. Confidence, tempered with carefulness and a collected mind, made the boy a good driver. Before the congestion of traffic compelled him to slacken speed he had passed the "Ambulance station" curve, now cut so deep by the racers that it resembled a ploughed field, and was well on toward Chester.

Close to the road, near the Clarion camp, stood Freddy Perth. He recognized Falwin and called to him, "Give me a lift to the

grandstand or to Queensville," he asked. "I've nothing to do and I want to see the celebration. Gee Whiz! Ain't Kemper it, though!"

Gladly Roger took Perth in, but he feared to tell the object of his eager haste to find the Auto Boys and kept the conversation centered on the *Clarion's* victory. As to this there was certainly no difficulty. Fred could think of little else.

The crowd at the grandstand was dispersing rapidly when the two boys drove up.

"Would you mind watching the car for me while I look for the fellows?" asked Falwin.

In another moment he had jumped down, and, as he ran forward, scanned eagerly the many machines and the hot, perspiring, dusty crowds.

"There they are!" he cried to himself a few minutes later. "Why! that Gaines fellow is with them, too!"

And so he was—Soapy Gaines, trying to conceal his face, was in the tonneau of the Thirty.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET OF THE WOODS

Just how it happened that Mr. Soapy Gaines was in the Auto Boys' machine, sheepishly trying to conceal his face, a brief explanation will make clear. First of all, let it be said, he was there by no request or invitation other than his own; though to the credit of Phil and Billy, Dave and Paul, be it also stated, they had not turned him away in time of distress.

Gaines' plan to leave Tom Pickton to shift for himself while he went to the races alone was based on his most unselfish intention of buying just one, and only one, seat in the grandstand. This he did and for a time a very important young man he considered himself to be. But not for long. Eli Gouger, the Sagersgrove detective, it will be remembered, was one of the

special officers on the course near the main stand.

Gaines saw and recognized him. His heart beat fast.

Mr. Gouger did not see Soapy—at least not at once. It was not until that young person had quite overcome his first great fear that he would be immediately arrested and locked up as a fugitive from justice, that the detective's eyes chanced to rest upon him. A second and a third time he looked, and then the expression of recognition that came to his face was all the assurance Gaines needed to know that he was discovered. Seriously frightened now, he hurriedly left his seat and hastened out of the stand. His terror increased as he observed the special officer craning his neck and even running forward a little way as if to see where he would go.

From that moment on, Soapy was the most uncomfortable individual in all the vast crowd the race had attracted. He dared not return to his seat, dared not approach the high wire fence

which, at this point, kept the too-venturesome back from the track. Once when the announcer's exciting cry, "Car coming!" impelled him to go up where he might see the racer zipping past, he found Gouger stationed almost directly opposite him. Quickly he hurried to the rear of the grandstand again and even crept beneath it.

In all his silly swaggering and loafing about the Crown Hotel and wherever the racing men congregated, Gaines had made not one friend. Of even mere acquaintances he had none to whom in this hour of his worry and alarm he could appeal. He had been up all night. He was very tired, very dirty, very hot. He would have been glad enough now to have had Tom Pickton's company.

All in all, Gaines' spirits caused him to magnify greatly the danger confronting him. It was real to some extent, no doubt. Mr. Gouger would have been glad to lay hands upon him; but had Soapy known how limited the would-be detective's powers really were, he would have

breathed far more easily. As it was, he felt that in all the world he had not one friend.

With actual, briny tears trickling slowly from his eyes, leaving their marks in whiter streaks upon his dusty, unwashed face, Gaines unhappily contemplated being captured and thrown helpless and alone into jail. There was no doubt in his mind that the moment the races were over and he could leave his duties as an officer of the course, Gouger would come in search of him. But if ever Soapy possessed a resourceful quality, it was gone from him now. All he could do was bemoan his fate while hiding back of the stand—a coward in every way.

A great shout told that the race was over. He heard the name of Kemper in the victorious cries and knew the *Clarion* had won. A minute later came the noisy tumult that proclaimed the *Hare* a close second.

And now the unhappy boy burst into tears in earnest. Most foolishly the wretched creature had staked all his money on the contest's outcome. Knowing hardly more about

automobiles than a child, the silly braggart had wagered all he had on the Henry car, left hopelessly in the rear.

The crowds came pushing, surging out of the stand. After a long time came Phil Way and his party. They remained behind to learn the official time of "Mystery" and to figure out that he would easily have won the race but for delay on his last lap, due to a leaking radiator. They passed Gaines without seeing him. But Soapy saw Billy and Phil and in a sudden burst of despair ran after them.

Why dwell upon the miserable boy's humiliation? His own selfishness, and folly of a score of other kinds, had brought him only what he deserved; but the spectacle of his appealing for assistance to the very persons he most wished to harass and annoy was nothing if not pitiful.

In silence the Auto Boys heard Gaines' broken lamentations. He wanted only to get to Queensville, he said, and he would do anything, *anything*, for them if they would take him in

their car. He did not tell the truth as to why he feared the officer from Sagersgrove—that would have been quite unlike him. He said only that he had been charged with “speeding” in that town and knew nothing of it until long after leaving there. He did not tell the truth when asked where Pickton was, but said he had wanted Tom to come with him to the races but the latter had preferred to go with some new acquaintances he had found.

It all ended by Phil Way saying, “Come along!” and Paul Jones saying,—and rude enough it was, too—“Looks as if something was wrong with your eye, Soapy!”

Billy Worth had the grace to tell Paul to take the wheel of the Thirty and so remove that young gentleman from further opportunity to use his tongue in a similar way.

MacLester meanwhile had said not a word. Now he muttered to Phil, aside, that “no good would come of letting anyone see Gaines with them, and he knew it.”

Such was the situation, the Auto Boys just

ready to start for Queensville, Gaines hiding his face, still in terror of being found by Gouger, when Roger Falwin came running up. For a moment the youngster paused as he recognized Soapy. Unmindful of the tumult of questions instantly asked him, he said he wished to speak to Phil alone.

The interview was brief. Flushed with anger, Way turned to Gaines.

“Did you know that Pick was out around our camp in your car to-day—and at another time, once before?” he demanded.

Soapy protested that he knew nothing of the kind. Then slowly the thought occurred to him that if this were true, it would explain why Tom was so eager to have the use of the Roadster, alone. In a fury, at once, to think that deceit had been practiced upon him, on *him*—he told the Auto Boys what he suspected: that quite by himself Pickton had been trying to find their stopping place. For what purpose he did not know.

Phil at once told where Tom Pickton and the

Roadster had been seen but in Soapy's hearing said nothing about the robbery. A look exchanged with his friends made clear to them the suspicion entertained.

"You go with Jack, Billy. Take the South way around to Gilroy in his car. The rest of us will go through town and take the North road. Watch every machine you meet and if you reach Wimby's store before we do, wait for us. If you do happen to meet Pick on the road—well, if you do, you can let us know. Soapy will stand with us if any funny business has been going on—won't you, Gaines?"

That young gentleman's nerves having been somewhat stimulated by excitement, he replied with far more of his customary braggadocio than he had lately shown, that he "rather thought" he would.

And now, as rapid action was necessary, there was an exchange of but a few more words, including some parting comment on the outcome of the races, and Roger and Billy were

off in one direction and Phil, Dave, Paul and Soapy Gaines in the other.

It was a surprise to Billy to find Fred Perth in Falwin's car; but he bluntly told that young gentleman what had developed, and where he and Roger were going.

"Why, the crazy Indian!" exclaimed Perth in astonishment, referring to Pickton. "I *knew* he was coming it over Soapy to get the use of the car, but I never thought he was doing more than just chasing around! Why, all he ever toadied to Gaines for was to be in and around that old boiler shop of a machine of his! Say! can't I go along? Not a thing to do till night! Falwin will be coming back my way!"

"Sure thing, if Billy says so!" cried Roger, already backing to turn the car about, and as Worth said nothing, Fred jumped up to the rumble seat.

The roads were still congested with the motors of the race spectators, some going one

way and some another. It was impossible to make rapid speed but without incident and in good season Falwin drove up in front of the Gilroy store. Phil Way and his party in the Thirty had not yet arrived. Twenty minutes later they came speeding up. The blockaded condition of the main streets in Queensville had detained them.

Soapy Gaines and Perth exchanged glances but neither spoke as they saw each other. Phil, Dave and Paul gave Perth a welcome, but it was no time for mere conversation.

A whispered conference among the Auto Boys and Roger Falwin took place. They were debating whether to tell Gaines of the robbery of the camp and the suspicion toward Pickton. The trouble of deciding was spared them. While they were talking, Mrs. Pride came hurrying out from Wimby's store.

"The burg-u-lar is still *at* the woods!" she exclaimed. "Nobody's seen him goin' back to town, anyhow! Why don't ye get a constable?

Mr. Keep that used to be one has some handcuffs, too! He'd be glad to lend 'em, I know!"

Perth instantly guessed all that Billy had not told him. To Gaines the boys now found it necessary to explain how circumstances had developed connecting Pickton's name, justly or unjustly, with a robbery at their camp. Of course Soapy was thrown into a rage of indignation.

"No wonder you wanted to break off with him, if you suspected crooked work like that!" said he to Freddy. "Why didn't you tell me?"

But Perth answered coldly: "*I* was willing to play fair, all right! I didn't suspect Tom of anything, no more than you did."

A few seconds later both machines were under way for the six-mile run to the woods. Phil, seated beside Paul at the wheel of the Thirty, was by common consent in command. MacLester little relished his place in the tonneau with Gaines, but said nothing. Falwin with Billy and Perth in his father's car fol-

lowed close behind. Mr. Falwin had already returned to Queensville in Mr. Kurl's machine.

The boys found the track of the heavy Roadster leading back into the woods along the old logging trail. They left their own machines at the roadside. Silently the entire party of seven entered the forest. The car that had preceded them, they were confident, could not be far away. Billy and Paul, as Phil planned it, should remain with the Roadster, once it was located, to make sure Pickton did not escape in the machine unobserved. The others would push on to the camp. What they might find there, or elsewhere, was a problem.

Even what they expected to find not one of the boys would have ventured openly to state. Pickton had a perfect right to go into the Ship woods if he liked. Yet it was certainly strange that he had, apparently, chosen for his visit a day when he knew the Auto Boys would be absent from their camp—and strange that he had been there since morning.

Not one of the four chums suspected the real truth. Gaines did, and so did Perth. They believed Pickton was searching for that mysterious spot the finding and uncovering of which he, and they, had all along believed to be the Auto Boy's Quest. Whatever else he might be doing mattered little to Gaines, at least. To him it was only evident that Tom had played him false.

Fred believed this to be true, also, but notwithstanding that his sympathies were now entirely with Phil and his associates, he could not muster the moral courage to tell all he suspected. Perhaps his own feet were too far into the mire in this respect—or had been, at the beginning—to permit of it.

So did the Auto Boys go forward quite unprepared for the scene that awaited them. So did Gaines, with rekindled hope, believe he yet would share in some unknown treasure that Tom's perfidy (as he saw it)—would have kept from him, but for the fortunate—(also, as he

saw it) circumstance of his falling in with the four friends just as he did.

They came quite suddenly upon Pickton as he slept.

From early morning Tom had been busy. Pausing only to make sure the tire and other plunder he had concealed were as he had left them in the thicket, he cautiously approached the camp of the Auto Boys and returned with a pick and a spade. Then moving to one side the three stones, piled one upon another, he commenced to dig.

Often his labors were interrupted. Every rustling twig and leaf startled him. It seemed to him the sound of every blow he struck into the earth could be heard for miles. Repeatedly he started up, unnerved and frightened, ready to flee, he knew not from what.

But returning to the task, the poor wretch whose determination was worthy of a better purpose again put forth all his strength. Now he had a large hole excavated at the spot the stones had occupied. He must work somewhat

to one side, he reasoned, and this he did—not only to one side but to all sides. The perspiration poured down his face. Wiping his wet forehead with soiled, bare hands, he left particles of earth clinging there. In time these spread themselves quite over his countenance.

After a long, long time, utterly fatigued, irritated by disappointment, despairing, and almost desperate, Tom sat on the bank of the great hole he had made to eat his lunch. Afterward he crept over to the old stump and again uncovered the tire, the brushes, the revolver and all he had hidden there. With a kind of grim curiosity he inspected them. Lying down, his head supported on one hand, his elbow on the ground, drowsiness stole over him. Ere he realized it, he was giving way to his overpowering weariness, and presently his eyes closed and he knew no more.

The discovery of the Roadster led the Auto Boys and the three with them directly to the neighborhood of the thicket. The mound of fresh earth, at a little distance, at once at-

tracted their notice. Quietly they went forward. There lay Pickton just beyond the great hole he had excavated. The tire and other stolen property were beside him.

Gaines would have rushed furiously upon the dirty, exhausted, prostrate boy at once had not Phil Way restrained him. With upraised hand the latter commanded silence. Questioningly the lads gazed about them.

The three stones, the deep excavation, the pick and spade told one story plainly. Just as clearly the unused tire and other articles beside it told another.

"Well," asked Phil Way, and his words were just a squeaking of his usual rounded tone, "shall we wake him?"

It was unnecessary. Pickton sat up suddenly. Like one in a dream he looked from face to face and all about him. Then in a flash the whole bitter truth seemed to rush upon his mind and he sprang to his feet.

"I—I—" His harsh voice was lost in the depths of his throat as he tried to speak. But

only for a moment did words fail him. A flame of chagrin, anger and defiance that suddenly rushed over him gave him his vocal organs for an outburst of awful violence.

“You sneaking dogs! All of you! And liars! What do I care? Yes, I stole your tire and your gun and whatever you see here! And I found your old mystery of three stones piled up to mark the place when none of you sapheads *could* find it! And if there’s anything under or near ’em, you’re good and welcome to it. So what are you going to *do* about it?”

The harsh and bitter, bitter note in Tom Pickton’s voice, defiant though he sought to make it, was truly pitiful. Yet like some fierce creature of the great woods, brought suddenly to bay, he glared savagely at those before him.

“Look here, Tom Pickton, you’re on the wrong track!” cried Phil Way hotly, but without anger. “You’ve got to remember—”

The others had fallen back as if stunned by Tom’s violence. But suddenly Billy Worth in-

interrupted. "You are the numbskull and the saphead yourself, you *Crazy!* There's nothing, nothing under these three stones!" he said explosively, stepping almost into the excavation in his excitement. "You sneaked around our garage or somewhere and you heard us talk about these stones and you got on the wrong track from the start. Talk about sneaking! Talk about lying! Neither we nor anybody else ever told you the three stones meant anything like what you imagined!"

"Humph! Only the place where Dan Sole and another hunter found ginseng growing in these woods years ago, and they marked the place, expecting to come back for it and more!" ejaculated Paul Jones, breaking in sharply. "They told us about it 'way last year! Nothing else to it, you dummy!"

If Pickton was dazed by this intelligence, and his face showed it, Soapy Gaines was no less so. With an effort he tried to conceal his surprise and his own grievous disappointment. "I

could have *told* you there was nothing to that fairy tale you dreamed, Pick," he said feebly. "I knew just how this whole thing would turn out," he added with an air of injury and scorn.

Pickton looked the contempt he felt. Otherwise he still stood defiantly silent.

"Well, it's about like this, as I see it," said Freddy Perth with rather less excitement than had yet been shown. "There's the three of us that have got just about what we had coming, one way and another. I'm not going to blame everything on Tom. But anyhow, Pick, and hang it all! Gaines! we can tell 'em we're all *sorry* for every bit of it! Gee whiz, *I* will! And we *are*, Phil, and Bill and Paul and Davy! We acted like a lot of low-bred curs, and we know it. We couldn't even stick together by ourselves. We did think—all of us—that you fellows were after some buried fortune, or something and I'll own up to it!"

Fred's softened tones had their effect on Pickton, and when Way answered kindly, "Oh,

we knew you never meant anything but some fun!" Tom hung his head. Still looking down—

"Here's your stuff, fellows," he said, "all but some postage stamps, and I will pay you for them. Whatever else has happened, nobody but me took your things, and whatever you do with me, for mercy's sake don't tell my folks! Don't let anyone back home know about—my—stealing. Oh, I wouldn't have had this happen for the world! I *wouldn't!*" he pleaded. Tears stood in his eyes as, with a hang-dog air, he looked up for a moment.

CHAPTER XXIV,

A SECRET STILL UNTOLD

“S’pose Pick better go with Soapy and run his machine in for him,” spoke MacLester brusquely, in the midst of further pleading from Tom and some assurances from Way and the others that they did not want to punish him. “Don’t see the use of staying *here* all night!”

Though blunt, the suggestion was to the point and served to relieve the general strain. Gaines plainly showed he did not relish being thus assigned to Tom’s company, but he had the sense to know he must return to Queensville and that he could not operate the Roadster unaided.

“I can’t go! I—I can’t do anything till I know just what you intend to do about me,” moaned the miserable Pickton. He had thrown

himself upon the ground now, his face buried in his arms.

"Phil, Billy—all of you—won't you let me answer him? I happened to be the first one to tell you about his being here, let me be the judge, then." It was Roger Falwin speaking and his voice was quite commanding in its strength.

"Why, certainly! Just the thing!" chirped Paul Jones approvingly and more quietly the others also assented.

"All right, then," spoke the younger boy gladly, a pleased smile on his handsome face, "All right, then! Tom Pickton, you take these things back to the camp and leave them. Don't you ever tell anybody but your very own self that they were ever carried off and the rest of us will never tell even each other, but just forget it ever did happen. Come on, Tom, I'll go with you and carry the pick and the spade!"

"Rah! Bully for Jack!" cried Paul who, in spite of his sharp tongue, was tender-hearted and sympathetic to a marked degree.

More soberly the others echoed the sentiment and it was followed by Perth carrying the pick, Roger the spade and Pickton the other belongings of the Auto Boys while all the remainder of the party followed along behind them to Camp Golden.

A thought came to Phil as he and Billy walked on together. It was long past noon and none but Tom had so much as a lunch. He would like to ask all the Chosen Trio to have dinner at the camp. So he put the thought in the form of a suggestion to Worth.

No, sir! Billy would have nothing of the kind taking place, if he had anything to say about it. But Phil might ask Dave and Paul, he said, how they regarded the idea.

It was done. Dave agreed very positively with Billy. Easy-going Paul Jones said he didn't care, but he shrugged his shoulders as if adding, "Though really, I'd rather not."

In a most dejected state of mind, wretched, half-penitent, half-resentful, Pickton threw down the stolen tire beside the tent at Camp

Golden. With a gesture of spite that did him little credit, too, considering the leniency so lately shown him, he deposited the revolver and all the other items of his theft on the improvised table inside. Then—

“Hop along, Soapy, if you want me to take your machine in,” he said moodily; and humiliated, disappointed, hating himself and all beside, the wretched boy turned back the way he came.

Gaines followed after Tom, slowly and alone, and presently the Auto Boys, accompanied by Roger and by Freddy Perth, also returned to the old logging trail to bring the Thirty and Mr. Falwin's car around to the camp.

Fred had been asked to remain at the woods for the balance of the afternoon. He had neither declined the invitation nor accepted it. The Auto Boys had no thought but that he intended returning to the camp with them, as proposed, and undoubtedly Perth would have liked to do so. Yet he feared to have even the ap-

pearance of forcing himself in where he was not wanted.

Fred realized that he, quite as much as Gaines and Pickton, had set out originally to disturb the plans of the other boys as much as they possibly could do. He was sorry—sorry enough, now. The chums would find him their friend at all times in the future, he told himself. But a feeling that he owed Tom, and even Soapy, what assistance his company could be to them, despite the shabby treatment he had received, was strong within him.

“I’m going with Pick and Gaines, if you don’t mind, fellows,” said Perth. They had all come to the old trail now and Tom was cranking the Roadster preparatory to starting. “You see each of the three of us has had his own bad medicine in this affair, Tom worst of all,” Perth went on. “And now that he’s down so bad, I’ve got to stand by him till we get home, anyhow. Guess we’ve all learned a thing or two. Guess we all needed the teach-

ing. And so—so long, all of you, and—don't think too hard of us, will you?"

The wistful earnestness of Fred's tone touched the hearts of all who heard him. Somehow it made them feel more kindly toward poor Pickton, too. And as the Roadster backed and turned the four chums and Roger stood near and called "Good-by!"—called "Good-by" and "See you all in Lannington," putting kindness and genuine friendliness into their voices.

Perth answered cheerily. Gaines' response showed a milder manner and more softened spirit, too, than he had ever before displayed. Tom did not speak but pretended to have all he could do in managing the machine; but just before the car passed from view he turned half around and looked back. He waved his hand slowly, thoughtfully, then twice nodded his head as if he said, "I've learned my lesson."

Arriving with the two cars at Camp Golden, Roger and the Auto Boys had a hearty lunch, then turned toward Queensville. They wanted

to get the newspapers for their various reports of the races, also to leave Mr. Falwin's car with its owner. These errands having been pleasantly performed, all returned to camp, for Roger had arranged to remain with the friends until they returned home.

The next day, Sunday, was a time of most pleasant, tranquil rest. One incident of interest occurred while the boys were at dinner. Attracted by the sound of a rather noisy automobile, they ran to the margin of the camp's ledge just in time to see the machine cross the bridge below and soon disappear. It was headed toward Lannington. Perth, Gaines and Pickton, homeward bound, were its passengers.

For yet another week the five tenants of Camp Golden enjoyed all that nature so bounteously offered in the great Ship woods. They were successful in discovering several additional plots of the wild ginseng and the location of each was carefully recorded. It was the boys' plan to return in the fall, the most de-

sirable time for gathering the roots, for such purpose, and they did so in due time, making their work quite profitable.

If Lannington friends learned at last the purpose of the four lads' mysterious expedition, which in one way and another they did, they have at least not learned the secret of "Three stones piled one upon another to mark the place." For that mild mystery is a secret of a strange kind now—a secret involving Tom Pickton's good name and honor.

The Auto Boys have never told it. Gaines and Perth have done as well, and Tom—there can be no doubt he has profited by the bitter, bitter experience of that day of the great race.

The Thirty, so long one of the cars familiar to all automobile enthusiasts and admirers in Lannington, served its fond owners in many a pleasant run and tour as the days passed. Possibly—yes, probably, its quiet, powerful engine would have been running still—its polished metal shining as brightly as it had always done,

except for—which really is another story, or at least a considerable part of one. It is the next of this series. “The Auto Boys’ Camp” is the title.

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